

THE IMAGE OF THE REMAINDER IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND
VISUAL ARTS

A Dissertation

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The present dissertation studies the image of the remainder in three variations—garbage, human remains and wastelands—as they appear in contemporary Latin American literary and visual products. Works by Marcelo Cohen, Vik Muniz and Teresa Margolles are clustered around the image of garbage in chapter 1; Rodolfo Walsh, Artur Barrio, Rubem Fonseca and Guadalupe Nettel offer the images of human remains analyzed in chapter 2; and finally, chapter three reads the image of the wasteland in José Revueltas, Sebastião Salgado, and Matilde Sánchez. This constellation of images produced by contemporary writers and artists from Argentina, Brazil and Mexico is read against its immediate historical context to uncover the patterns of political engagement triggered by a moment of crisis. These moments of upheaval produce an awareness of collective vulnerabilities, which find their expression in images of waste. The most recurrent pattern of collective behavior after an instance of crisis, as it is observed in the analyzed works, can be summarized as a political mobilization springing from the improvised usage of waste materials as a strategy for the survival of the community.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marcela Romero Rivera was born in Guanajuato Mexico and lived in Mexico City and Leon before moving to Monterrey to study Spanish literature at the Tec de Monterrey. This north-bound move continued a few years after obtaining her B.A. degree, this time to New York City where she got a M.A. in Liberal Studies at The Graduate Faculty at The New School for Social Research. During her years in New York City she also continued the teaching career she had started in Monterrey, serving as a language instructor at The New School and New York University. Further north, Marcela moved to Ithaca, NY in 2005 to join the doctoral program in Comparative Literature at Cornell University. She got her Ph.D. degree in August 2012, thanks to the help of family, friends and family.

A Guille, Eunice y Enrique. Gracias por ser y por estar.

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Introduction

The genesis of this project can be traced back to one late January afternoon in Rio de Janeiro, when I was returning to the city of Rio de Janeiro after having visited its landfill. In the drive back, as I completed my notes about the place and the workers I had spent the better part of the day getting to know, I had the clear sense of having tapped into a particularly rich streak of research and academic engagement. At this time I was finishing the coursework requirements for my doctoral program and the moment of choosing a dissertation topic was drawing closer. I had decided to explore what I thought was the growing presence of apocalyptic thinking in various realms of our contemporary cultural landscape, and specifically in the Latin American context, but I found myself with the problem of framing the dissertation topic around a notion that I sought to denounce and criticize, but to which I had no clear alternative to propose.

The immediate goal I was pursuing with my visit to the biggest garbage dump in the subcontinent was to finish formulating an answer to a question posed by Susan Buck-Morss about what would be the contemporary spaces of materiality that could yield as much historically significant information today as the arcades did in the 1930s when Walter Benjamin studied them. This space should be symptomatic of the age and the particular shape that capitalism has acquired in the twenty-first century, and it should also reveal the utopian promises of our age in a state of decrepitude or frank decay. My initial response was the landfill, since the size and composition of contemporary landfills are the direct result of modes of production and consumption that do not precede the twentieth century. The promise of abundance extended by free-market economic models is not so much proven false by landfills, as it is exposed by the

actual kind of abundance that it yields: a bounty of precariousness and poverty makes those impressive mountains of rot.

However, after having heard the workers of the Jardim Gramacho landfill talk about their own road to political mobilization using the marginal use-value of discarded commodities, it was clear that my original answer was limited and surpassed by the evidence of the political possibilities of waste. I then started picturing waste as an alternative logic to the apocalyptic logic of radical collapse and historical cancellation, rather than just a symptomatic material manifestation of contemporary capitalism. It seems counterintuitive to oppose waste and the declaration of the absolute end—after all, the distinction between scatologic and eschatological seems almost negligible. In the following chapters, however, I construct an argument that explains why this distinction is valid, and what are some of the political advantages to siding with the logic of the remainder rather than with that of the end.

It was that afternoon in 2008 that the present investigation started getting shape, but it took very long to come together in the form that is presented here. My initial interest in the political experiences of the landfill workers had to find its way into a project based on literary and visual analysis of materials that displayed instances related to these issues.

Field

This project wants to participate in the field of the visual studies, understood as distinct and separate from art history. Visual phenomena, including but not limited to art, describe the wealth of scopic information in the midst of which we find ourselves living today. These phenomena are overdetermined, so they cannot be attributed to a unique

sphere of social life, but they target the sensorium in a way that is historically significant. Never before have we lived surrounded by so much stimulation reaching our consciousness through the optic channel primarily, and this is also the age that has seen the larger dissemination of the technological means of production of images.

These circumstances make the visual arena extremely ductile, transformative and adaptable, and it also makes its critical engagement all the more urgent and relevant.

Buck-Morss explains the emergence of the field in the following terms:

Whatever the stated goals of Visual Studies, its effect is the production of new knowledge and its first challenge is to be aware of this. According to one well-established, critical tradition, this means questioning the conditions of its own production. Why is Visual Studies a hotspot of interest at this time? Whose interests are being served? In analyzing the technologies of cultural production and reproduction, can Visual Studies affect their use? Is this inquiry merely a response to the new realities of global culture, or is it producing that culture, and if the latter, can it do so critically? . . .

I will be very bold. Visual Studies can provide the opportunity to engage in a transformation of thought on a general level. Indeed, the very elusiveness of Visual Studies gives this endeavor the epistemological resiliency necessary to confront a present transformation in existing structures of knowledge, one that is being played out in institutional venues throughout the globe. (Buck-Morss "Images in the Mind: Visual Studies and Global Imagination")

I am particularly interested in the fact that this field, as it is described above, is defined by the questions it allows to contemplate as opposed to having already a well-established, all-encompassing method to be applied to any and all instances of visual

phenomena. This pliability is central in the case of the analysis of Latin American cultural products like the present because it is the only way to avoid suffocating the particularities of the concrete images under the weight of a closed theoretical apparatus. This project includes literature as the second cultural realm where I look for images of waste. But even if the visual status of the analyzed works is not fully observed as a clear parameter here, I do, nevertheless, try to maintain the logic of the visual even when it comes to literature. And the strategy that I found effective to operate this crossing of disciplinary boundaries is by working with fragmentary images, both textual and visual.

My working definition of image in general is this: “the synesthetic effect of the activation of the sensorium by visual stimuli.” These stimuli include visual objects as well as text, which reaches the sensorium at least in two different manners. First as a visual object whose perception does not depend on the decoding of the intended meaning of the words, as it is evidenced by examples of calligraphy or by a text written in characters that are unknown to the observer. The second manner reaches the sensorium through an alternate physiological channel and it includes the process of reading, with the attached phenomena of understanding as well as misunderstanding or misreading. The question of the validity of a single definition of image that includes these two manners of affecting the sensorium stands and was the central disciplinary and methodological challenge of the project.

By *activation of the sensorium* I refer to the compounded experience of perception that alludes to one or more of the senses, which is enriched by the evocations of memory (creating a new memory in turn), and whose effects are susceptible of being divided into conscious and unconscious traces. Ultimately, *image* defines the field of investigation of this project insofar as it is included under the umbrella of Visual Studies as described above, and not as an empty gesture of allegiance, but because it is in this field of inquiry that the image is deployed as freed from the aura of privilege

attributed to the artistic image, whose defense is still attempted today. With the acknowledgement of the loss of the aura of the art object, after the advent of photography, the possibility of massive circulation and communicability of the image is open, and the political power of those images—granted by their sheer massive reproducibility and circulation, as opposed to their artistic pedigree—is ushered in.

Context and Key Terms

Latin American history from late 1960s to the present has been dominated by a narrative of ideological collapse and political failure. I read fragmentary images of remainders left in the wake of regional political projects in the region's recent history. I follow three iterations of the remainder—garbage, human remains, and wastelands—present in contemporary literature and visual arts from Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, looking at their significance as part of the regional cultural and political landscape.

This project seeks to contribute to the interdisciplinary discussion on Latin American cultural production. In my dissertation, I revisit the political character of cultural products, challenging the discourse of the crisis of the politicized, committed artist or intellectual. My strategy in so doing is to integrate a dialectical materialist perspective—greatly indebted to Walter Benjamin—into the reading of literature and the visual arts, to bring a political, sociological, and philosophical perspective into a project focused on literature and the visual arts. To bridge literary and visual analysis I use the image as main methodological tool, respecting the fragmentary character of the image of waste by arranging my examples into constellations instead of forcing a definite narrative structure upon them.

The term *remainder* is associated with others used throughout the project, such as, waste, detritus, refuse, or discards. I consider them all close to being synonyms, recognizing at the same time that each has a particular meaning that makes it more pertinent in specific contexts; it is my aim to keep this specificity in mind in different instances. However, I prefer to use *remainder* as the general operative term to describe the subject matter of this project because of the emphasis it places on *what is left* after a process of subtraction. A possible alternative description of the general goal of the project could be to acknowledge the processes of transformation, valuation and circulation of the materiality that remains after an instance of exclusion/ disposal has taken place. *Remainder* helps keeping the attention on the afterlife—of the commodity, the human bodily existence, and the land—, rather than on the value that has been spent in the process of consumption, or on the mechanisms of disposal of what is not deemed valuable anymore.

This consideration of *image* as a phenomenon primarily tied to the materiality of the world and the effects it produces on the human sensory-perceptive system begets an understanding of aesthetics that lets its etymological sense reverberate, turning it into the realm of the material experience as opposed to the name of the game of the art market.

Academics and art critics have read the image of waste thematically, relating it to concomitant preoccupations such as social, economic, and environmental decadence. This project sees the image of the remainder—embracing Walter Benjamin's work on the ruin and other forms of debris—as the material evidence upon which historical processes leave their imprint. Images from the cultural production of artists like Artur Barrio, Vik Muniz, and Teresa Margolles, along with that of fiction writers like José Revueltas, Marcelo Cohen and Guadalupe Nettel show the remainder as an obstruction that, through a process of dislocation and displacement, forces an acknowledgement of social processes of collapse and fragmentation, but far from merely lamenting or

mourning, they contemplate new possible arrangements of such fragments and of their inherent political force.

Following the fragmentary character of the image of the remainder, I arrange my examples into constellations. Ultimately, my objective is to forgo the reading of historical debris as bound to a linear narrative ending in arresting trauma. Instead, I propose the possibility of political engagement through the critical incursion in the realm of visibility to uncover (or rather to turn our eyes onto) the processes of violent exclusion/ violent resistance/ negotiation/ displacement/ recirculation, which define the terms by which contemporary Latin America has dealt with its own non stomachable excrescences. This is the force of evidence that the image of the remainder makes available through massive circulation.

Organization of the Chapters

Regarding the organization of the analyses, they are presented in three different chapters, each one dedicated to a specific manifestation of the remainder. Garbage, human remains and wastelands are the three central images that the chapters follow.

Chapter 1, “Garbage” offers a materialist definition of the remainder as conceived in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, which frames the analysis of the powerful work by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, of Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, and of Argentine novelist Marcelo Cohen. Trash, the most quotidian form of waste, is understood in these works more as an effective material tool to interrupt the *status quo* than as lamentable monuments of loss. Waste as a phenomenon to which all members of a society can claim a relation is made visible in the detritus of the Mexican drug-trafficking violence turned into flashy jewelry by Teresa Margolles, of Brazilian city’s streets and landfills

metamorphosed into oil-painting consecrated images by Vik Muniz, and that of the rest of the industrialized world that ends up flooding the fictionalized Argentina in Marcelo Cohen novel *Donde yo no estaba*.

Chapter 2, “Human Remains” shows the possibilities of political mobilization brought about by coming in contact with the image of the tortured and imprisoned bodies of criminals and political prisoners, generally regarded as social rejects by the enforcers of “legitimized” modes of violence. Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación masacre* and Artur Barrio’s “bloody bundles” spread around the city of Belo Horizonte in 1970 make visible the masses that were economically ravished and violently repressed by the military juntas who seized power of Argentina and Brazil in the 1970s. Opposing the sense of a resigned victimization, the characters in Rubem Fonseca’s short story “A arte de andar nas ruas de Rio de Janeiro” and Guadalupe Nettel’s *El huésped* show the politically productive interruption that destitute bodies effect by marching, haggard and fetid, out of marginal visibility and into the social spotlight.

Chapter 3, “Wastelands” traces the pendular movement of the image of the land in Latin America’s recent history. In the first half of the twentieth century, the indigenous and the developmentalist paradigms yielded socialist-leaning national programs shown already in frank decay in José Revueltas’ *El luto humano*. Sebastião Salgado uses his celebrated powerful lens to put in focus the tragedy of the dispossessed peasants of the Northeast of Brazil in his *Terra: The Struggle of the Landless*. During the 1980s the neoliberal paradigm of the free-market oriented, privately-owned land created the new dystopian landscape visible in Matilde Sánchez’s *El desperdicio*; there, the city is abandoned in favor of the rediscovered land that although devastated, breathes heavy with marginal forms of life.

CHAPTER 1. GARBAGE

Marcelo Cohen's *Donde yo no estaba*

— 1 —

Donde yo no estaba (*Where I Wasn't*) was published in 2006, but Marcelo Cohen began sketching it after the events of 2001-2002 in Argentina. Those watershed years for recent Argentine history rudely awoke the nation from its fragile neoliberalism-sponsored dream of irresponsible acquisition of debt and spurious wealth. With the collapse of the one-to-one exchange rate of the Argentine peso and the US dollar, the false sense of equivalence between Argentina and the First World was revealed as the unsustainable illusion it had always been. Once this false floor was taken out from under the Argentine economy, the abysmal differences between the First and Third Worlds appeared with renewed clarity. And the harsh reality of unevenly distributed international power produced a regrouping of Argentine political forces, some of which veered their attention inward, pushing to try out solutions that were improvised, topical, and punctual—and mainly concerned with ameliorating the new dimension of misery in which millions found themselves.

Strategies such as the occupation of factories by workers' cooperatives and of halted building projects by homeless families, attempted to solve immediate problems in a chaotic environment, where the rule of the law was porous and malleable, to say the least. This course of events led to a moment of political effervescence whose protagonists were not the (repeatedly ousted) governmental class, but the people affected by the problems that these measures tried to solve. It goes without saying that this kind of direct political intervention was largely unconcerned with the place that an Argentina-in-crisis occupied in the international arena; the overt outward attention of neoliberal economical policies had been responsible for the mounting time bomb that

exploded in December 2001. The crisis and immediate responses to it afforded the possibility of thinking of Argentina (if only for a short while) as sort of an island momentarily dislocated from the international order, a liberated space where the exercise of a freer manner of political mobilization was possible. These improvised interventions were often based on new configurations of the remainders, the ruins of the system that the crisis left in its wake. Factories abandoned by owners forced into bankruptcy were taken over and reconditioned by their laid-off workers; construction sites halted by the crisis—the ruinous material testament of the very excesses of irresponsible expending that contributed to the crisis—provided housing to organized communities of families left unemployed and homeless. Even garbage, recyclable materials that were not processed by the municipal waste management companies, made possible the reactivation of scavenging on a grand scale as a form of economic survival for large contingents who had recently been forced out of the middle class.

Marcelo Cohen situates *Donde yo no estaba* on a fictional island called Múrmora, which is placed in a nebulous future where pianos and films are archaic artifacts displayed in museums, but where the social and political institutions that shape the collective life of the people are not dissimilar to the form of high capitalism that saw Argentina cross the threshold into the 21st century. In 726 pages, Cohen constructs a science-fiction world that is not as invested in predictions of technological advances or sociological dystopias as it is in displacing the context of its text into an temporal and geographical opening where it can explore questions of the constitution of the social, familial, and amorous subject, while escaping the tyranny of realism. The allegorical dimension of *Donde yo no estaba* is quite transparent, so it does not call for a paranoid reading where the correspondences of the literary and extra-literary terms require a tortuous digging through obscure references. Even the neologisms and made-up words that pepper the text are easy to decode, giving the reader the sense of merely

entering the province of a neighboring country with a particular linguistic hue that, even if one cannot reproduce initially, one can immediately understand.

The novel is the incredibly detailed diary of the protagonist, Aliano D'Evanderey, and the double-headed authorial entity (Cohen-D'Evanderey) seems to exercise an enjoyment whose plan of action is the written word. Aliano's diary not only provides space for his thoughts, memories, and recounts of conversations; it includes lyrics to popular songs, fragments of two of his favorite novels in the order in which he is reading them, poems by his lover Lumel, several pages of the diary of a teenage acquaintance of his, political propaganda recovered verbatim, and even summaries of a very popular soap opera. The illusion that these inclusions produce is that of an authorial voice without authority, one who is not interested in claiming for himself the title of omniscient narrator, not even when it is his own life that is being narrated. The texture of the novel, thus, changes constantly as the same writing hand evokes different voices, and it reads more like a textual collage of borrowed materials than the product of a unified will. But, the multiplicity of voices notwithstanding, Aliano is at the emotional center of the narration; he occupies a preferential place in his community as exemplary husband, father, boss, neighbor, and citizen.

Aliano is married to Cler with whom he fathered Sereno and Fiena, both of whom are very young adults when the novel begins. The relationships among the members of the family are solid and governed by love and mutual care. The D'Evandereys have owned a feminine undergarments business for generations, and it runs smoothly under Aliano's direction. His employees respect him and here too care rules their exchanges, which mainly concern issues related to the business, but not exclusively. Neighbors and even local politicians consider Aliano a prudent and generally benevolent figure in the community; he is even protected by an archaic proclamation inherited from his ancestors, which grants him discretionary, temporary exception from the law if and when he is convinced that his actions respond to a supra-legal notion of justice. The

almost idyllic life of Aliano, and therefore the scope of his diary, is confined to his neighborhood, an island within another island, just a fragment of an archipelago called the Delta Panorámico. However, there is no sense of oppressiveness, or lack of relevance, or isolation in Aliano's writing. If anything, his particular parcel of influence seems like a dense fabric of interpersonal relations in which the realm of the possible is open beyond the grid of regulations that makes it function properly.

— 2 —

The image of Aliano's threatened subjectivity opens the novel. He begins to keep his monumental diary as a response to news of a fatal condition that a medical examination has revealed, a condition that could kill him in twenty days or twenty years. The affliction is called *Mota de Samblovit* (Samblovit's Speck), and it is described as a sort of an outgrowth that is lodged in a brain fold and menaces the protagonist's life. If it were to burst, it could kill him. The symptom that alerted Aliano to the presence of the "mota" is an unyielding headache that figures in the diary from the first page to the last. Confronted with this reminder of his own mortality, Aliano resolves to begin the process of "thinning out" his existence, so as not to leave a scatological mark larger than is strictly necessary. This resolution includes keeping the news about his condition a secret, starting to write a diary, and delegating his business responsibilities to the sole interested party, his daughter Fiena.

About the same time that Aliano learns that he might die soon, his wife Cler confesses that she is love with another man and wants to end their marriage. The news does not take Aliano completely by surprise, but it completes a picture of the fragmentation of his previously idyllic existence. Dislocated from the main contextual

referents of his subjectivity, namely his family and his business, Aliano enters a new realm where the notions of waste, the remainder, refuse, and the relation of the central to the marginal that they suppose present themselves as matters of life and death. The “speck” that inhabits his brain is the first sign of pollution that inserts a wedge in the quotidian wholesomeness that the protagonist has provided for himself. But the narration bypasses the possible overtones of tragedy that could very well define that moment of crisis in the story. Aliano finds his first tactic of interaction with dissolution and decay in his writing, which still provides a creative outlet, even as the author seems to transpose the fullness of his life onto the rapidly growing pile of pages onto which he chronicles his willing, gradual disappearance. As his diary grows more robust every day, Aliano continues his quest to disappear in a way similar to the mythic Narcissus, who, after withering away, left only a flower to commemorate his existence. Writing is the narcissistic mortal remainder Aliano wishes to have mark his passing.

Aliano, the exemplary bourgeois, is broken, fragmented, and displaced by illness and radical changes in his familial and work structures. He loses himself in the scatological realm of written language to reinstate the order that his extra-textual life seems to have lost. Through this first immersion in the waters of the remainder, Aliano establishes a passage to an opening that allows him to challenge the subjective position he has always held as a proper member of the community. He expressly wishes to “adelgazar su existencia” (to thin out his existence) as an individual whose supposedly constitutive attributes can be evoked at once by enunciating a proper name. What he keeps and even exacerbates in this process is his entanglement in the concrete web of affects that contain him as only a part of his community. This alternative and multiple mode of existence highlights the fragmented character of subjectivity, which makes the protagonist hold a different affective position in each specific relationship.

This other, more diffused existence comes into focus with the irruption of the *Mota de Samblovit*, which makes Aliano aware of the various affective spaces that will be void

with his death, and he makes provisions to minimize the loss as much as possible. The affective dimension of Aliano's existence—and the relations of mutual care through which it is expressed—is further emphasized by a curious recurrence that the protagonist notices in the days and weeks following his diagnosis. His wife, his children, his employees, and even local politicians whose acquaintance he makes formulate the demand that he should “make a gesture,” meaning that he should take some kind of action in the different realms in which his relationships take place. The same demand is repeated throughout several days, and although it is only logical to assume that it would mean something different in each instance, the pattern that the reiteration describes comes to the foreground for Aliano: He must decide whether to continue with his intention of gradually disappearing, and thus lessen the impact of his eventual death, or stand by the many affective positions he holds and further insist on his importance for the collective fate of his community.

Caught in this dilemma, Aliano starts paying more attention to the vicissitudes of the form of political system that rules the Murmora island and the whole Delta Panorámico, namely, the “*democracia gentil*” (gentle democracy), which is basically an extremely malleable form of capitalism that has renounced all ideals of progress. This gentle democratic capitalism can adapt to almost any change in given conditions in order to keep the status quo, which in turn is sustained by a perpetual rift among classes and an uneven distribution of wealth. Neither utopian nor dystopian, the “*democracia gentil*” has removed most of the symptomatic outbursts of discontent proper to capitalism, concealing the foundational violence of exploitation through the consumption of happiness-inducing drugs with no ill effects and powerful, readily available forms of entertainment.

Despite the generalized efforts of the “*democracia gentil*,” there is turmoil brewing in Aliano's immediate surroundings. A group of destitute families has forcefully occupied an old building, the Hidulya Mansion, in the neighborhood of the

protagonist's business; and because of their obvious disregard for the law these new residents are looked upon as undesirable, marginal elements who disrupt the neighborly social tissue. A number of concerned neighbors led by Mr. Curtian, a business acquaintance of Aliano who is distressed by the fate of his building, push to find an adequate measure to vacate the premises. The problem that the righteous neighbors face is the perceived violence inherent in the community of squatters: They are jacks-of-all-trades, informal vendors of foods and small trinkets, and occasionally, drug-peddlers (all occupations that require a fair amount of "street-smarts," a healthy dose of cunning, and a readiness to exert violence as a form of self-preservation). The Hidulya Mansion is also protected by a pack of "perroparias" (canine-pariahs) who contribute to disruption of the ordered landscape with their smell, their excrement, and the ferocity with which they defend the unlawful tenants who feed them. The neighborhood is divided between those who think the Hidulya mansion ought to be evacuated by any means necessary—they are represented by Curtian—and those who, like Aliano, defend the inalienable right of the people to improvise a way of living that helps them to survive.

An opportunity to solve the problem that the squatters represent comes when one teenage drug-peddler who lives in the occupied building finds himself in the middle of a conflict with the local drug lord, Fanas. The youth had been instructed to keep a small bundle of "fraghe" (a cannabis-like narcotic) in his house and to then cut it and sell it on the streets. The problem arises when the child's grandfather, mistaking the "fraghe" for a stale bundle of tea, flushes it down the toilet. Upon hearing the news, the drug lord threatens the child with instigating the definite expulsion of all the squatters from the building if the value of the drug is not repaid to him. Then, another one of the squatters, a young man called Yónder Nágaro, decides to respond to the drug lord's threat by kidnapping his son and threatening to sodomize him. This episode further divides the community, and not even among other squatters does Yónder find any

allies. Convinced that if they hand Yónder over to Fanas, they would prevent the evacuation of the Hidulya Mansion, most of the occupiers turn against the young avenger, who did not enjoy much popularity anywhere to begin with. A persecution ensues, and Yónder, helped only by his nephew Payle, asks Aliano for refuge in his new bachelor studio. Here, Aliano decides to improvise a gesture to further his entanglement in the social grid, but he does so by choosing to embrace a marginal position in it.

— 3 —

Yónder and Aliano's first encounter takes place a few days before the conflict at the Hidulya Mansion explodes. Just as the protagonist learns about the little speck that is polluting his brain and receives the collective demand of making a gesture, he feels suspended on the verge of life and death, of self-effacement and self-assertion. This point in the narration is dragged throughout the first hundred pages of the novel, making it apparent that this suspension could go on indefinitely had Yónder not made an entrance in the protagonist's life. This is how Aliano describes that encounter in his diary:

Había dado unos pasos cuando choqué contra un campo magnético. El golpe me dejó vibrando como un diapasón. A dos metros de la vereda había un pedazo de muchachón vendiendo pescado. Del pelo vaporoso a las botas reventadas, todo el cuerpo era un aglomerado de restos (...) daba asco, el gesto, pero no rechazo; había en el campo de fuerza varios agujeros que invitaban a colarse; estaban ahí aunque costara situarlos entre los vahos de un séquito de perroparias. Torbellinos de caspa

mugrienta. Anillos concéntricos de olores corrosivos, tufo del pescado y del pecho del pescadero. Músculos gruesos y feos. Esa piel de alabastro artificial o hueso de plástico (...) Nunca había visto una mezcla tan ligada de saña, arrogancia y privación. Ese muchachón venía de la helada y la quemadura, del hambre y el empacho, del placer rápido y la postergación sin fin, de la carne herida y el bisturí remendón, de la psicosis y de la indiferencia espléndida y de una serie de pares que habrían seguido colonizándome la cabeza si él no se me hubiera acercado a preguntar si se me ofrecía algo (Cohen 96-97).¹

From that point on, Yónder carves his way into the protagonist's life, appearing at the least expected moments, until Aliano begins to think of Yónder as a disruptive element that pushes deeper the subjectivity-splitting wedge that the Mota de Samblovit represents. But instead of thinking about both the speck in his brain and Yónder as alien parasites that overwhelm his constitution, Aliano begins to establish an identification with them. The *Mota de Samblovit* is merely a reminder of what he, like the rest of humanity, already knows, namely, that human existence is conditioned by its foreseeable end. Similarly, Aliano thinks of Yónder as a supernumerary body part that altered the order of his organism without being extraneous. In other words, Yónder is also a reminder of the chaos and organic decay that are very much part of Aliano's and the rest of humanity's nature.

The presence of Yónder in the neighborhood is generally perceived as caustic, and people other than his nephew and Aliano come in contact with him only when absolutely necessary. For Aliano, however, Yónder is a catalyst that breaks the existential impasse that interrupted the bourgeois routine of his pre-*Mota de Samblovit*

¹ I had taken a few steps when I hit a magnetic field. The strike left me vibrating like a tuning fork. A few feet from me on the sidewalk was a big guy selling fish. From the scabby hair to the broken boots, his

days. The rift that illness and familial dissolution opened in his subjectivity provided a space for that which is fragmentary, decaying, and other. Yónder's company furthers that subjective decomposition when Aliano recognizes an important part of himself displayed in the image of the lumpen Yónder, which stirs a desire to belong that manifests diffusely at first as an improbable but undeniable sympathy for the pariah:

Me afligió que lo que parecía estar cerrándose en torno a mí no tuviera ni la consistencia de una trama ni su aspecto. Me gustaría ser parte de un argumento novelesco, pero allí no había ni un cabo por atar; solo el roce íntimo de unos hilos que aún no eran textura. El chico Payle me había provocado simpatía. Por Yónder me habría dejado sorber, como si Yónder fuera una esquirla de mi destino que decía: *Tú eres también esto, esto que ves es el Yónder-en-ti* (106).²

Thus, Yónder is this dislocated *esquirla*, or shrapnel, that lodges itself in Aliano and starts to swell the protagonist's subjectivity. Yonder is the embodiment of the remainder in this novel, not only because he is physically described as a hodgepodge of diverging elements that find no harmony in the whole they form, but at the level of ideological constitution, Yónder is similarly an aggregate of opposing political dispositions. In the world that Cohen writes, individual human consciousness is a porous entity that can be shared with and penetrated by other consciousnesses. The resulting sum of all individual consciousnesses is called "la Panconciencia," which forms a nebulous realm that hovers above the general population which with minimal effort can access this collective sensorial awareness—an activity also known as *enchufarse a la Pan*—just as one would an ample avenue to wander about until one finds an individual terminal that offers the visitor the opportunity to share the conscious

² It saddened me that what seemed to be closing in around me didn't have the consistency of a plot nor its aspect. I would like to be part of a fictional argument, but here there was no thread to weave; only the intimate grazing of some fibers that didn't have a texture yet. The Payle kid had provoked my sympathy. By Yónder I would have let myself be absorbed, as if Yónder were a shrapnel of my own destiny that said to me: You are also this, what you see here is the Yónder-in-yourself.

experience of the host. This popular exercise of mutual invasion of the last frontier of privacy is described in *Donde yo no estaba* as an addictive, inexpensive, popular, albeit marginally reprehensible form of entertainment akin to watching TV for several hours a day.

The human body and the consciousness it sustains and feeds are treated as a manipulable material entity in Cohen's novel. Microchips and other forms of technological implants are popular even among the most destitute sectors of the population. Yónder, an addict to the "Panconciencia," is a walking palimpsest with all the markings of his time inscribed on the surface of the body and deep-seated in the innermost layers of his consciousness. But far from a positive showcase of the material life of his time, Yónder—the human embodiment of technological and ideological progress—shows how this progress functions in such a disorderly, fragmentary way that he is a walking landfill himself. And this heap of wreckage displays the material evidence of the failed projects of the age and reveals their decadence. In one of his encounters with Aliano, Yónder traces an autobiographical sketch that is reconstructed in the protagonist's diary.

De chico traficaba con fraghe y otras yerbas narcóticas... Por el soplo de una novia ofendida cayó preso; y le faltaba purgar tres años y medio... cuando un agente del programa "Civilidad por condena" le propuso sacárselos de encima con un año de servicio en las Balugas... [mediando] en las disputas entre nuestros colonos (los maneros) y los caudillos y chamanes nativos... Era trabajo tupido y... cada vez que tenía un respiro empezó a evadirse enchufándose a la Panconciencia... Había descubierto la manera de permanecer largo rato en una conciencia remota, como quien se sienta a mirar por la ventana de una casa usurpada, sin que el contactado se aperciese de su presencia. Sólo que un día un escritor de las Islas Prucias, un tipo insurrecto y resentido, lo agarró infraganti y,

como vengativo escarmiento, le selló la conciencia con un retorno permanente, lo dejó pegado a él, el tipo, y desde entonces utiliza a Yónder como difusor de sus panfletos sediciosos.

Yónder tiene una zona mental interferida por ese escritor corsario y en otra zona lleva grabadas las enseñanzas del experto en relaciones públicas que lo adiestró en las Balugas. En una tercera zona de la mente de Yónder se estira en un constante mediodía de nubes bajas (193-194).³

When the conflict in the Hidulya Mansion led to Yónder's persecution by all parties involved, Aliano finally found the "trama novelesca" in which he wanted to be caught along with Yónder. Payle kept him informed about the twists and turns of the story of the young drug-peddler after Yónder decided to intervene, fighting fear and violence with the same. Alerted to the animosity that everyone involved (including the rest of the squatters of the Hidulya Mansion) felt for the improvised avenger, Aliano found himself reflecting on the radical abandonment that surrounded Yónder.

En casa, el Yónder-en-mí empezó a rondarme la jaqueca. Decía que ese desequilibrado está muy solo. Que ni los suyos le son fieles, y que en su desequilibrio podría hacer cualquier cosa, en efecto. Pero la soledad de Yónder no es una especie de disidencia. Ni es la soledad de su cráneo, esa mazmorra invadida de mensajes ajenos. No es simple fruto de la

³ As a child, he had trafficked fraghe and other narcotic herbs . . . By the betrayal of a spurned girlfriend he went to jail; and he still had three and a half years to serve . . . when an agent of the program "Civility for sentence" proposed to take them off in exchange for one year of service at the Balugas . . . [mediating] in the disputes between our settlers (the maneros) and the caudillos and the local shamans . . . It was intense work and . . . every time he had a respite he started escaping by plugging onto the Panconsciousness . . . He had discovered a way of stay a long while in a remote consciousness, like someone sitting looking through the window of an occupied home, without alerting the contacted person. But one day a writer from the Prucias Islands, an rebel and resentful type, caught him in the act and, as punishment sealed his consciousness with a permanent return, thus leaving Yónder stuck to himself, and since then the man uses him as a mouthpiece for his seditious pamphlets.

Yónder has a mental zone interfered by that pirate writer, and another one inscribed with the teachings of the expert in public relations who trained him in the Balugas. In a third zone of Yónder's mind a constant noon of low clouds drags on.

misanthropía, ni un ataque al protocolo de la convivencia servil. Quién sabe si no es un furor insuflado por la marginación. Una búsqueda de sensaciones verdaderas. Un ansia de epopeya tan pura que sólo se satisface pasando por la abyección (305).⁴

Once Yónder finds himself not only alone, but universally persecuted, he goes to Aliano's home in the middle of the night looking for protection from the mob that already follows him closely. By publicly agreeing to give shelter to the fugitive, Aliano sanctifies the incongruent pairing of the petit-bourgeois shop-owner and the unsightly lumpen squatter—an image utterly offensive to the concerned neighbors, who had already been mobilized by Fanas, the drug lord, and Mr. Curtian to deploy a siege outside Aliano's apartment. The official forces of the municipal government were unable to enter the premises because Aliano took legal refuge in “el Fuero de los Cabales,” the archaic, rarely-invoked exemption inherited from his line of well-respected ancestor-citizens that grants him, and Yónder, legal immunity as long as they remain inside the walls of the small studio. So, dislocated and displaced, this infectious splinter that comes from “yonder” inserts itself into the center of this community: the subjective core of Aliano, one of its most revered members.

— 4 —

Inside Aliano's apartment, the dialectical relationship between the two characters continues, mediated by the material concreteness of Yónder's body odor. More than

⁴ At home, the Yónder-in-me started to hang around my headache. It said that this unbalanced type is very lonely. That not even his peers are loyal to him, and that in his unbalanced state he could do anything, in deed. But Yónder's solitude is not a type of dissidence. It's not the simple result of misanthropy, not is it an attack on the protocol of the servile coexistence. Who knows if it's not just a rage insuflated by the imagination. A search for real sensations. A yearning for epic adventure so pure that it can only be satisfied passing through abjection.

any moral reprehension held against the pariah, what placed Yónder in the margins of the social grid was his fetidness. Once Aliano is forced to share his small living quarters with Yónder's body and smell, which he can't stomach, Aliano does what he can to embrace the man and incorporate the stench as a long-lost particle of his own constitution.

In the Argentine literary canon, the theme of material decadence and the physical proximity to it that central characters attempt to establish is present in works such as Juan Filloy's *Caterva* (Faction) and Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (Hopscotch). Horacio Oliveira, the protagonist of the latter, finds himself in the middle of an existential crisis. Wandering the streets of Paris, his anxiety leads him to approach a *clocharde* (homeless woman) named Emmanuèle, in whose company he decides to spend one night drinking and taking shelter under a bridge. Oliveira has had some contact with the *clocharde* before that night; he knows her name and feels a generalized sympathy for her. When he decides to spend the night as a novice *clochard*, he is searching for an epiphany, a sort of passage that would allow him to traverse to a more elevated realm of existence, a utopian primitive community that he calls *kibbutz*. But the way to elevation requires, mysteriously, the intervention of the subterranean and the excremental, which stand in the liminal contact area between the superficial and the profound. Oliveira, who is a solipsistic but charming unemployed immigrant writer, looks around the *clochards* sleeping under the bridge and remembers a well-known anecdote about Heraclitus the Obscure. The pre-Socratic master, suffering from gout, decides to bury himself entirely in cow dung as a therapeutic measure.

Desde el otro lado de los portales venía un ronquido como de ajo y coliflor y olvido barato; mordiéndose los labios Oliveira resbaló hasta quedar... pegado a Emmanuèle que ya estaba bebiendo de la botella y resoplaba satisfecha entre trago y trago. Deseducación de los sentidos, abrir a fondo la boca y las narices y aceptar el peor de los olores, la mugre humana. Un

minuto, dos, tres, cada vez más fácil como cualquier aprendizaje. Conteniendo la náusea Oliveira agarró la botella, sin poder verlo sabía que el cuello estaba untado de rouge y saliva, la oscuridad le acuciaba el olfato... La náusea retrocedía, no vencida pero humillada, esperando con la cabeza gacha, y se podía empezar a pensar en cualquier cosa... Algo que le decía que también allí había kibbutz, que detrás siempre detrás había esperanza de kibbutz. No una certidumbre metódica... solamente como una aceptación de la náusea, Heráclito se había hecho enterrar en un montón de estiércol para curarse la hidropesía... exactamente igual que ellos, pero sin el vino, y además para curarse la hidropesía. Entonces tal vez fuera eso, estar en la mierda hasta el codo y también esperar, porque seguramente Heráclito había tenido que quedarse en la mierda días enteros (Cortázar 234–235).⁵

Oliveira's strategy (and Aliano's to a certain extent) is not about finding a dialectic connection between opposing realms: Heaven and earth (as in the first and last squares in the children's game of hopscotch), kibbutz and excrement, they do not come together to paint a picture of two-sided completeness or a sublated version of both. Earth and excrement, like all which is decaying, marginal, unworthy, and residual, hold the possibility of opening a passage to a way of living that is other, but still contained in the

⁵ From the other side of the archway there came some snoring that smelled of garlic and cauliflower and cheap forgetfulness; biting his lip, Oliveira stumbled into the corner and settled himself . . . close to Emmanuèle who was already sucking on the bottle and snorting with satisfaction after every gulp. Untrain the senses, open your mouth and nose wide and take in the worst of smells, human funkiness. One minute, two, three, easier and easier, like any apprenticeship. Keeping his nausea under control, Oliveira grabbed the bottle, even though he couldn't see he knew the neck was anointed with spit and lipstick, the darkness sharpened his sense of smell . . . The nausea went away, not conquered but humiliated, waiting there with its crooked head, and he was able to think about other things . . . Something told him that there was a kibbutz there, that in back of it all, always in back, there was a kibbutz. Not a methodical certainty . . . only an acceptance in nausea, Heraclitus had got himself buried in a pile of manure to cure himself from dropsy . . . just like the two of them except without wine, and besides, he wanted to cure himself of dropsy. Maybe that's what it was, then, keeping yourself covered with shit up to the neck and also hoping, because Heraclitus certainly must have had to stay under the shit for days on end.

realm of immanence. Heaven in Oliveira's hopscotch has no supremacy over earth, since they both share the same plane with all that is lowly: the trash and the filth of the streets. Oliveira, Aliano and Heraclitus looked to find a way to live otherwise, not in a transcendental sense, but to access other forms of relation and affect that are possible in the plane of the terrestrial.

Tumbado en el banco, Horacio saludó al Oscuro, la cabeza del Oscuro asomando en la pirámide de bosta con dos ojos como estrellas verdes, patterns pretty as can be... la gente agarraba el calidoscopio por el mal lado, entonces había que darlo vuelta... tirarse al suelo como Emmanuèle y desde ahí empezar a mirar desde la montaña de bosta, mirar el mundo a través del ojo del culo, and you'll see patterns pretty as can be, la piedrita tenía que pasar por el ojo del culo, metida a patadas por la punta del zapato, y de la Tierra al Cielo las casillas estarían abiertas, el laberinto se desplegaría como una cuerda de reloj rota haciendo saltar en mil pedazos el tiempo de los empleados, y por los mocos y el semen y el olor a Emmanuèle y la bosta del Oscuro se entraría al camino que llevaba al kibbutz del deseo, no ya subir al Cielo (subir, palabra hipócrita, Cielo flatus vocis), sino caminar con pasos de hombre por una tierra de hombres hacia el kibbutz allá lejos pero en el mismo plano, como el Cielo estaba en el mismo plano que la Tierra en la acera roñosa de los juegos (Cortázar 241).⁶

⁶ Collapsed on the bench, Horacio greeted the Obscure one, his head of darkness sticking up through the pyramid of manure with two eyes that looked like green stars, patterns pretty as can be. . . [People grabbed] de kaleidoscope from the wrong end, then you had to turn it around . . . Stretched out on the floor like Emmanuèle and from there begin to look out from the mountain of manure, look at the world through the eye of your asshole and you'll see patterns pretty as can be, the pebble had to pass through the eye of your asshole , kicked along by the tip of your toe, and from Earth to Heaven the squares would be open, the labyrinth would unfold like the spring of a broken clock as it made workmen's time fly off in a thousand pieces, and through the snot and semen and stink of Emmanuèle and the shit of the Obscure one you would come onto the road leading to the kibbutz of desire, no longer rising up to Heaven (rise up, a hypocrite word, Heaven, flatus vocis), but walk along with the pace of a man through a land of men

The immersion in the realm of the scatological for Oliveira and Aliano follows a spatial logic by which, they hope, new patterns will be revealed that will alter the relative place that each occupies in the respective affective grids that contain them. Finding patterns to interpret, however, has always proven to be an utterly equivocal endeavor. Heraclitus himself dedicated his teachings to elucidate the universal principles to interpret patterns in a manner that would better apprehend the truth, but the fragments of his work that survive to this day display such a level of abstraction that it is impossible to apply them in any concrete example. The “patterns pretty as can be” of the reversed kaleidoscope of Oliveira (that which looks backwards through the opening of the anus) offer more visual intrigue than a sustained sense of truth. The anus functions as the eye, as an obturator that opens and closes the body to the world, but one that yields no image. The anus is a blind eye. Ultimately, after the night that Oliveira spends drinking and talking to Emmanuèle, his eye does not discover any visually communicable truth, but the blind experience of being immersed in the realm of scatology stays with him, forcing a “dis-education” of the senses that helps him withstand the nausea while his sense of smell was sharpened. It seems that in both *Rayuela* and *Donde yo no estaba* sight does not help the protagonists immerse themselves in the excremental. It is only fitting that this descent into the lowly regions of human experience is conjured by a retrograde heightening of the olfactory to the detriment of the visual.

towards the kibbutz far off there but on the same level, just as Heaven was on the same level as Earth on the dirty sidewalk where you played the game.

— 5 —

Forced into close cohabitation with Yónder's smell, Aliano reflects on what this miasma produces in him and his own illness, as even his pervasive headache, the main manifestation of his *Mota de Samblovit*, wants to resist the smell initially:

Lo que no es Yónder-en-mí no soporta el olor de Yónder ... La jaqueca se puso a urdir conmigo planes para la fuga de Yónder, temerarios planes por cuyo éxito arriesgaría mi vida con tal de no tener que olerlo más. Estudiaría derecho un año para defenderlo con éxito ante un tribunal y librar a mi caridad de este tormento (Cohen 342).⁷

This passage brings to the fore the difficulties involved in the subjective rearrangement that Aliano attempts in opening a space for that which is Yónder-in-him. In their previous encounters, what had caught the protagonist's attention was either visual marks of fragmentation or the evidence of the ideological short-circuit that operates in Yónder's mind. This is the first time that the dimension of the olfactory enters the scene, proving to be the last frontier to cross to get close to the scatological. That which is not-Yónder-in-Aliano has a visceral reaction of physical repulsion to Yónder's smell. But, like Oliveira, Aliano stays patiently with the smell, "dis-educating" his sensorium.

Qué funesto que lo que en mí no es Yónder se parezca tanto a los cretinos de abajo. Pero también qué peste la de Yónder. No digo ya los flatos. La emanación de la piel, de las papilas y el cuero cabelludo, de la ropa. Olor a agua vieja de jarrón, a cable quemado, a grasa de motor, a col, a fermento

⁷ What is not Yónder-in-me cannot stand Yónder's smell.... My headache and I started weaving plans for Yónder's escape, gritty plans I would risk my life for so as not to smell him anymore. I would study law to defend him in a court and thus free my charity from this torment.

de almidones en un sistema gástrico sobresaturado, una totalidad abarcadora y corrosiva. Mi bulbo olfatorio llora. Ah, cómo quisiera no oler más. Pero oleré. Hasta que el olor de Yónder me corroa. Hasta que sea tan mío como el Yónder-en-mí (Cohen 342-343).⁸

The angry mob who zealously guard the refuge of the unlikely pair represents an extension of what is not-Yónder-in-Aliano; understanding the consubstantial nature of “los cretinos de abajo” and the fragment of the protanonist’s own subjectivity that rejects Yónder helps him resolve to withstand the suffering of his “olfactory bulb.” Gradually, smell-as-barrier recedes in the relationship between Aliano and Yónder. There are still a great number of scatological references in the diary entries for the days following Yónder’s arrival at the small apartment, but the image of the newly arrived acquires nuances and layers that occupy the attention of the host. Here is where the comparison of Aliano to Oliveira breaks off; after all, Cortázar’s protagonist never abandons his solipsistic reflection, which is ironic because all he wants is a passage, an escape route, to free him from his self-involvement. Emmanuèle, the *clocharde*, is never but a flat character sketched by a handful of lines and attributes, while Yónder comes to share the center of the story with the protagonist.

The main difference between Oliveira and Aliano is that Aliano perseveres in his immersion in the scatological. He is better suited to follow the example of Heraclitus, who not only took the first step down to the nether regions of human experience, but also did so patiently, at least according to the myth. Aliano overcomes his initial physiological repulsion and stays with Yónder’s odor until the two have the chance to escape together from their besieged shelter. Oliveira’s melancholic, scatological gesture

⁸ How terrible that what is not Yónder-in-me should be so much like the bastards downstairs. On the other hand, Yónder has quite a stench. And I’m not even talking about the flatulence. Just the effluence of his skin, of his taste buds and the scalp, of his clothes. They smell like stale water in a jar, like burnt wire, like motor’s grease, like fermented starch in an overwhelmed gastric system, a boundless and scathing totality. My olfactory bulb weeps. Oh, how I wish not to smell anymore. But I will. Until Yónder’s smell corrodes me. Until it is as mine as Yónder-in-me.

to find an alternative way of existing that he never knew becomes a gesture of transgression in Aliano's case, since he comes to the understanding that the mark of scatology in Yónder was not a radically new or alien dimension of existence; it already was, and it always is, a part of the human condition. Oliveira's kibbutz was never more than a nebulous desire and a passive wait; it was only a peek from atop a pile of manure, and little more. Aliano's siege, on the other hand, was in fact an opening into an immanent realm of existence that is often disregarded, but is always there.

His transit through the smell of organic decay grants Aliano a new subjective configuration. The protagonist could not have devised his involvement with Yónder under the circumstances of his persecution of the latter, and therefore he could not have followed a preconceived plan. Improvisation is the logic that determines Aliano's story. The gesture of self-affirmation he finally makes was one that no one was fully expecting: He embraced the remainder as an acknowledged part of his subjective constitution, thus opening that constitution to a logic of relatedness that depended on the affective position that the subject occupied in relation to other subjects, rather than on a notion of monadic individuality.

Yónder, as that which comes from beyond the horizon, is not completely assimilated by Aliano, however. Even after withstanding the siege together and after the lessening of the separation that smell imposed on the relation in its beginnings, neither character loses himself completely in the other; the radical fragmentation of Yónder's subjectivity fends off the possibility of a homogenizing or even a symbiotic intersubjective *mélange*. The affective place of Yónder in the story is not that of the lumpen messiah who comes to the aid of the bourgeois in crisis, restoring his subjectivity at the end of their involvement. Yónder, in his condition of being a breathing collection of dissimilar, excremental fragments of his time, is the wedge that further decomposes the image of the petit-bourgeois, like a broken mirror that returns a disarticulated image. Yónder's body is, for Aliano, an index of the neglected,

displeasing traits of humanity, which explains, among other things, the fervor of his persecution.

En el cuerpo de Yónder se ve bien qué lo hace violento. También en sus palabras. Se ve incluso que es un compuesto inestable . . . En Yónder se ve todo lo que nos habita a todos, y esto es lo que la caterva que grita en la calle no soporta. Yónder es la transparencia (Cohen 352).⁹

The apparent discordance among the many parts that make up Yónder is, thus, only a more transparent display of the contradictions and lack of coherence that is proper to every human animal. Cohen finds in the middle of a pile of wreckage the difficult and modest understanding that the fragmentary and scatological are the norm, rather than a reproachable historical exception. In the end, the full significance of Aliano's own gesture escapes him, but he gets to the other side (of his island, of smell, of persecution) through his close material relation to the fragmentary, excremental Yónder. The apparent completeness of Aliano's life at the beginning of the novel is challenged, broken, and rearranged by the acceptance of the Yónder-in-him, which leaves him still sick and still conflicted, but more comfortable with the fragmentary quality of his subjective disposition.

⁹ In Yónder's body one can see clearly what makes it violent. In his words, too. One can even see that he is an unstable compound . . . In Yónder, one can see what inhabit us all, and that is what the yelling mob in the street cannot stomach. Yónder is transparency.

Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage*

— 1 —

Although he was born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1961, Vik Muniz only began working as an artist after immigrating to the United States in 1983. After attempting a career in advertising followed by a string of odd jobs, he established his studio in the mid-1980s in Brooklyn, N.Y. During the following two decades he worked his way into the core of the American art scene, which led to international recognition that granted him the opportunity to represent Brazil at the Venice Biennial of 2001. By then, his two most recognizable artistic gestures—the use of unconventional painting materials and the reinterpretation of famous images—were already well in place, and his peanut butter and jelly rendition, *Double Mona Lisa after Warhol* (1999), was probably his most famous and celebrated piece.

The method that Muniz developed traverses various media. He first recreates a famous image, manipulating tridimensional materials in a very particular take on sculpture. After the composition is completed, he captures it in a photograph, which flattens it back into a two-dimensional plane. The result of this treatment is a double image that at first glance evokes the famous piece on which it is based, but which on a closer inspection reveals the texture and intricacy of the manipulated tridimensional materials.

The year 1998 marked Muniz's return to Brazil as an artist. By then, his work in Brooklyn had been almost exclusively with images extracted from a liminal space between the art world and popular culture. The exception to this was *Sugar Children*, a series of portraits of the children of sugar cane plantation workers of Saint Kitts. While vacationing in the Caribbean, the artist came in contact with these children and their

parents and was struck by the contrasting demeanors of the two groups. All that was playful and sweet in the children was weariness and disenchantment in their parents. Muniz attributed this difference to the grueling labor in the sugar fields, and he saw the metaphorical dimension of the triple relationship among the children, the sugar, and the adults: sweet children went on to work extracting sugar from the reeds in the field and this turned them into embittered adults. Back in his study in Brooklyn, he created portraits of these children using sugar on a black piece of cardboard. This was the first time that the social circumstances of his subject peer through the playful aesthetics of Muniz's work.

After the experience of *Sugar Children*, the artist undertook his first work with a Brazilian theme: *O Depois* (Aftermath). In this series, his subject was a group of homeless, crack-addicted youths from São Paulo, and his material was the debris left in the wake of the Carnival and collected on Ash Wednesday from the streets where these young people lived. According to the introduction to this series in the comprehensive catalogue *Vik Muniz: Obra Completa 1987–2009*, the artist approached these *meninos da rua* (children of the streets), and after he established a rapport with them showed them a book of art history and asked each of them to choose an artwork they liked and to pose like the subject in the painting; and thus he snapped their pictures. This was the only way, says the text, that Muniz could make the *meninos* pose: They were so unfamiliar with their own image that a simple direction to smile held no meaning to them (Muniz and Lago 298).

Art was the stratagem that the photographer used to obtain what he wanted from his subjects, namely, an image that could stand for a portrait of individuals who depend on the skill of being able to camouflage themselves and become invisible to survive the rigors of life on the streets. However, the reference to the original work of art that each child mimes is lost in the final result, which makes this project (along with *Sugar Children*) stand out from the rest of Muniz's works because no recognizable, iconic

image is reproduced in it. In figure 1, for instance, there are no clues to suggest what famous painting Emerson is trying to look like. What the spectator sees is the image of a child whose distrustful pose of crossed arms gives it a somber tone. The bright colors of the confetti and other pieces of garbage in which the portrait is etched only make the result more disconcerting, pushing to the foreground the contradiction of the coexistence of these two layers of the life of the city —the unbridled enjoyment of Carnival and the unmitigated misery of the *meninos da rua*.



Figure 1. Vik Muniz, *Emerson*, 1998 (Muniz and Lago 299).

In *Aftermath*, waste functions as an eloquent bridge that connects two apparently disjointed elements in the urban reality: the excesses of the carnival and the appalling poverty of a large portion of the population. Although Muniz's intention was to build the children's likenesses using the empty space between the garbage, and thus clearly separate them from the excremental nature of the debris (Muniz 298), what this series shows is a more insightful equation between the youths and the remainders of the celebration. Carnival is the ritualized, hyperbolic staging of the blind enjoyment that operates year-round in the collective life of the city, so it is fitting that the tired remainders of such celebration were used to recreate the image of the *meninos da rua*—who are themselves another material manifestation of the remainder of the urban collective organization, that which is at once central for its proper operation and regarded as expendable wreckage.

— 2 —

The second project by Vik Muniz in Brazil, and the first one in the city of Rio de Janeiro, was his series *Imagens de Sucata* (*Pictures of Junk*), executed between 2005 and 2007. The series is a long collection of reinterpretations of classical paintings with a Greek mythological theme, among which images of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* reign supreme. According to his own account, the artist initially intended to work with organic trash as his primary material; with that purpose in mind, he approached the waste deposit of São Gonçalo, and what he found there—health concerns and risk of a violent attack from the drug traffickers who ran the scene—persuaded him to abandon his original idea and to make a new choice of material, namely, pieces of discarded, rusty metal and hard plastic, big and small



Figures 2 and 3. Vik Muniz, *Narcissus*, based on Caravaggio (left) and *Atlas*, based on Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (Il Guercino), 2005 and 2007 (Muniz 547, 561).

The contrast that the artist wanted to provoke with the juxtaposition of such sublime images and ignoble material was in itself his commentary on how the human mind works. Muniz cites the traditions of junkyard creations popular in southern states of the U.S., such as Arizona and Texas, as his aesthetic influence for this project. “It is associated with bad taste,” he says, fleshing out one of the central elements of the collection; taste is an expression of culture, of laborious effort to wrestle a harmonious idea out of the quagmire Muniz thinks the human brain to be (546). The myths of the *Metamorphoses* hold significance for the artist that goes beyond this particular series. For him, Narcissus and Atlas, their tales and the renditions that classical painters made of them, represent some of the main accomplishments of humanity; they offer proof that when we accept the civilizatory influence of art and its myths, there is hope for order and harmony. Figures 2 and 3 are good examples of the triumph of a foundational

sense of proportion over the ignobility of a derelict material, whose usual artisanal usage was marked by a lack of proper aesthetic judgment. He wanted to bend the material to evoke his imagined origin of the civilizatory drive of art. Just like the gods do with bodies and the poet does with words:

I want to speak of bodies changed into new forms. You, gods, since you are the ones who alter these, and all other things, inspire my attempt, and spin out a continuous thread of words, from the world's first origins to my own time (Ovid and Kline 1.1-4).

Gesturing back to his usual process of work, Muniz steps away from the confrontation with concrete historical subjects and into the realm of ahistorical evocations of human time. The thread that the poet asks of the gods to connect him back to the origins is one spun of fantasy, made of metaphoric fibers. The resulting fabrication is Ovid's solid mythological edifice, which is continued by artists like Caravaggio, Il Guercino, and Goya, and then taken up by Muniz, extending the reach of the myth all the way to the 21st century. But in this attempt to interweave himself into (art) history, Muniz actually abandons the historical concretion of the place of the project. What is the role of the city of Rio de Janeiro in this collection? None. Except maybe, as a negation, as the erasure that Muniz decided on when he changed materials. This meant a renunciation of real chaos, danger, and disorder. But that is already obvious in his interpretation of Ovid's work in general. On different occasions, Muniz has referred to the *Metamorphoses* as his favorite book, and he claims to have read it every day since he was six years old (Feitlowitz). The fascination, he explains, comes from the power of magic involved in transformation, when one object is turned into another.

An alternative way to read the *Metamorphoses* is to see Ovid's tale as a concatenation of stories about the violent overtaking of a subject's body by the will of gods who punish cruelly in the pursuit of their relentless desire, which is monstrous in its self-affirmation unbounded by death. Going back to the Greek roots of Ovid's tale, it

would be fair to say that the task of the poet is to harness the gods' Dionysian drive with that Apollonian discipline of form that is poetry. Muniz seems particularly tone-deaf to the evident tension between the violently terrifying threat of chaos that these transformations entail, and which can only be tamed when the poet passes their Dionysian core through the sieve of metaphoric language.



Figure 4. Vik Muniz, *Saturn Devouring one of his Sons based on Francisco de Goya y Lucientes*, 2005 (Muniz 560).

Myths and poetry serve the purpose of taming the terrors of an inscrutable world that overwhelms human understanding and capacity for self-preservation, but the mechanism of poetic manipulation is not one of simple flight from the evidence of chaos. Myths insist on the terrifying fragility of human fate, while preserving its memory in a form that has better chances of survival and proliferation than mortal human bodies.

What Muniz seems unaware of is the bigger risk in dealing with the organic life of matter, which does not manifest itself visually as innocuous disorder or as the bad taste (kitsch) associated with junkyard art. No, the more pressing danger gives out a smell of corruption that announces the threat of illness and death, which is always present in the kind of trash that he decided not to work with. When Muniz changed materials, he also decided to sever the ties that this collection could have had to the historical specificity of its time and place of production. Instead, he chose to continue the tradition of the poet who asks the gods to spin out a thread to connect him to a dreamlike understanding of time.

Nevertheless, even through the thick layer of mythic enchantment with which Muniz coats his work, the eloquence of the materials and images is still discernible. While Muniz chooses to tame kitsch with his allusions to Greek mythology, death and violence escape his attention and discourse, only to resurface in the pictures themselves, ready to be reaped by the public despite their author's intention. For example, figure 2 seen from afar evokes the double image of young Narcissus staring intently at his own reflection. A closer inspection of the piece reveals the complete fragmentation of what seemed like continuous lines and shades into small pieces of metal and plastic. At the same time, one can see the refuse of the forms of production specific to our historical moment serving as a reflecting surface for an immemorial tale of the deadly risks of specular fascination. In the myth and in Caravaggio's versions, the distinction between the body of Narcissus and his reflection on the pond is clear,

but in Muniz's rendition it is more difficult to distinguish between them because both are two-dimensional pictures taken from tridimensional compositions. A Narcissus made of junk invites a long list of scatological associations: he is a man finding his image in the discarded objects of the world; he is loving himself in the refuse; or is the refuse loving itself in the man? Instead of a mythological flower, the 21st century Narcissus leaves junk as the trace of his withered body in history.

Where Vik Muniz sees ethics and civilization, there is actually evidence of violence and predatory, self-perpetuating desire. Where he wants to evoke the effect of the interactions of the gods with mortals, one can find evidence of the historical debris of capitalist desire.

— 3 —

Vik Muniz started working on *Imagens de Lixo* (*Pictures of Garbage*) in 2008. The first stages of the work were conceived in Brooklyn, where he and his team started planning their visit to the biggest landfill in South America, Jardim Gramacho, located in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. From early on, the project was followed and shot by filmmaker Lucy Walker, who later would show the process of development of the series in the documentary *Wasteland* (2010). According to the statement that the artist makes in the first minutes of the film, his intention was to use the power of art to change the lives of a group of people, using the same materials they worked with everyday (Walker et al.). What gives unity to this work is the use of garbage from the landfill as its primary medium. Once again, Muniz approached the garbage dump with the intention of working with organic waste, but once more he changed his mind before the actual compositions were made. Instead of rotting garbage, the portraits in this series

are made of recyclable materials, which the workers of the dump (*catadores*, as they call themselves) collect and sell to recycling companies.



Figures 5, 6 and 7. Vik Muniz, *A Cigana (Magna)* (left), *Mãe e Filhos (Suellem)* (center) and *A Carregadora (Irmã)* (right), 2008 (Muniz 641, 642, and 640).

If the portraits of the street children in *O depois* did not evoke any iconic reference, in *Imagens de sucata*, all there is to see is iconicity uninterrupted by the intervention of any historically located subject. This time, unlike in his first two Brazilian projects, Muniz attempted to mix icon and historical subject in the same image. *Imagens de lixo* is constituted of seven reinterpretations of recognizable canonical paintings mediated by non-famous workers of the landfill acting as models. These portraits show a group of *catadores* adopting poses from the oil painting tradition. There is Magna as a gypsy woman (fig. 5), Suellen as a Madonna with children (6, Irmã as a bearer (fig. 7), and Carlão as an Atlas (fig. 8). There are also three reinterpretations of famous paintings: Isis posing as Picasso's *Woman Ironing* (fig. 9), Zumbí as Millet's *The Sower* (fig. 10), and Sebastião as the title character in Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (fig. 11).



Figure 8. Vik Muniz, *Atlas (Carlão)*, 2008 (Muniz 644).

These are triple portraits full of depth and texture. Being renditions of well-known works of art, first they are portraits of different moments in art history; they are also portraits of the workers of Latin America's largest landfill; and finally, they are portraits of the landfill, since the image that the lens captured is a carefully arranged collection of trashed commodities. Even though the eye cannot perceive these three levels at once, and the viewer must choose how to look at them, these different levels are evoked in one single stroke, which forces the viewer to pause the observation when confronted with the impossibility of apprehending the triple image in a single glance.



Figures 9 and 10. Vik Muniz, *Mulher Passando Roupas (Isis)* (left), and *O Semeador (Zumbi)* (right), 2008 (Muniz 643, 645).

The process to make these pictures was complex and involved the *catadores* every step of the way. First, Muniz approached the workers and offered them the chance to be part of the series; they then posed for a photo that would serve as a blue print for the final image. Then they collected colorful materials from the landfill as they usually did,

but this time to be bought by the artist and transported to a warehouse for the next step of the creative process. In the studio, the workers arranged the materials on the floor, following the directions that Muniz gave from a scaffold to reproduce the images of their own portraits using the materials they collected. Once the reproduction was ready, Muniz took a picture of the final product that was then hung on the museum's walls as 8 by 5 foot prints.

— 4 —



Figure 11. Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*, 2008 (Muniz 639).

For his version of *The Death of Marat* by David (fig. 11), Muniz chose Sebastião Carlos dos Santos (Tião), president and spokesman of the Associação de Catadores do Aterro Municipal Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG), the Association of Workers of the Municipal Dump of Jardim Gramacho. After the first picture of Tião is taken at the landfill, it is then projected and reproduced on the floor of a nearby warehouse, using materials that were salvaged from the landfill by the models themselves. This is the first movement of dislocation: in order to turn into art, waste needs to leave the landfill and its stench behind. The worker and the material he works on are made into one single image by the alchemy of art. Once the sculptural step is complete, Muniz snaps a photograph—an image of the image—that will travel and find its way to visibility.

The worker, his politics, garbage, and the landfill were only tangentially evoked and immediately displaced when they were revealed for the first time in January 2009 on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, not far from Jardim Gramacho. But probably the clearest moment of displacement of this image of waste came later on that year, when those discarded commodities and the image of an informal-economy worker found their way back into the circulation of capital through one of its most rarefied doors: the art market. *Marat (Sebastião)* was sold at auction in London for \$50,000.

Parallel to this movement of displacement of the collective image of the landfill workers and the materials that sustain that image (both in and outside the picture), another alchemic change takes place at the level of the image revealed in *Marat (Sebastião)*. It is not difficult to establish a correspondence between the historical image of Marat and the role that Tião plays in the context of Jardim Gramacho. However, there is an implicit violence in turning him into a historical figure whose specific political intervention—that which granted him his condition of icon—occurred in a context so far removed from Jardim Gramacho. Muniz forces the process of metamorphosis that he so loves onto a Third World “informal” worker, and just as in

the myths, the consequences of such intervention are beyond the control of the one whose body is changed into new shapes.

There is a series of implications evoked along with David's rendition of the death of Jean-Paul Marat. In the painting, the French revolutionary is captured in the moment of tragic arrest of his political puissance, after being betrayed and murdered in the intimacy of his bath chamber. Evidence of his work and his illness appears in the scene in the form of papers he was working on, the quill still fastened in his limp hand, the murderous blade, and the therapeutic bath where Marat needed to lie to soothe his infamous chronic skin ailment. All these details are superimposed on the image of Tião, fusing them with the attributes of the young *catador* into a new composition that reinterprets his life in Jardim Gramacho and his efforts to organize his coworkers.

After Muniz's alchemic intervention, Tião's image acquired a patina of vulnerability to political betrayal, which, ironically, could be said to have begun precisely with his transformation into a work of art—or into an archetypal politician, thus betraying the specificity of his political goals in Jardim Gramacho. The work that he did by leading a group of unorganized individuals working in and off of garbage in 21st century Brazil is not consubstantial to the work of Marat in 18th century France. Even the social connotations of Marat's skin ailment are vastly different from those of the leprosy and other waste-borne diseases that threaten the health of Tião—and of all *catadores*—on a daily basis. By fusing these two figures, the content of each one's politics is discarded in favor of a visual representation of “the revolutionary” as an abstract, ahistorical notion. Just like Narcissus' flower, *Marat (Tião)* is the aestheticized, scatologic remainder that stands in for the vanished, mortal, historically specific individual.

In his introduction to the *Imagens de lixo* series in the most comprehensive catalogue of his work, Muniz states that he felt he needed to get closer to the people working at Jardim Gramacho in order to feel entitled to work with the materials from the landfill, and that he found the way to approach these portraits in his usual inspiration drawer: art history. He wanted to use classical inspiration to mask the misery and appalling conditions that he saw at the landfill. The question remains, though, as to whether he effectively entered the realm of the workers and understood their wants and their assets. Did he, or did the artist just dream an allegory and project it onto the surface of those laboring bodies?

O trabalho, o batente mesmo, só começou a aparecer em pintura—na arte, de modo geral—com o fim da escravidão. Quando já não se tinha mais o negro para o labor pesado, era preciso transformá-lo em atividade legal—era preciso enobrecer o trabalho. Rapidamente surgiram as imagens—as alegorias—do trabalhador, do camponês valoroso, do operário padrão, do homem que vive do suor, da dedicação, do produto de suas mãos . . . Foi a essa iconografia que recorri como base para—levando aquelas pessoas para o estúdio e as retratando—criar as *Imagens de lixo* (638).¹⁰

Art as a mechanism, as it is acknowledged in this passage, uses strategies of visibility and concealment that have social and economic origins and effects. The representation of labor in art helped attach a sense of dignity to physical toils that were previously the

¹⁰ Work, labor itself, only began to appear in painting—in art, in general—with the end of slavery. When the slave was no longer available for intense labor, it was necessary to transform it into a legal activity—it was necessary to dignify work. Quickly after, emerged the images—the allegories—of the worker, of the valiant peasant, of the factory worker, of men who live of his sweat, of dedication, of the product of their hands . . . It was to that iconography that I resorted as the basis to create—taking those people to the studio and making their portrait—the *Images of Garbage*.

exclusive province of slaves, which is to say, labor was regarded as a daunting struggle that only those without a choice would undertake. Is a self-serving, dignifying of labor what Muniz achieves with this series? What does the artist show and what does he conceal to accomplish his particular agenda?

Concretely, Muniz shows garbage arranged in a pattern that reproduces the figure of a worker who poses as a work of art. Just like in his rendition of Narcissus (fig. 2), it is not clear in this portrait if the worker finds his image in the trash he collects, if it is art history that finds yet another replicating medium in contemporary debris, or if, perhaps, it is the garbage that looks at itself in the reflecting surface of the human figure. This multitude of interpretations is sustained simultaneously, and the observer can go back and forth among them and discover unexpected visual associations that, like the thread that the poet asked of the gods, connect Muniz's subjects (the *catadores* and the garbage) to the fabric of art history. All of these connections occur in the realm of myth, though, so the biggest act of concealment in *Imagens de lixo* is the vanishing of the actual material life of the landfill and the concrete historical weight of this group of organized, politically conscious, informal workers.

It seems as though this project never really left the symbolic space of the museum of contemporary, economically successful art. Only apparently is this work about garbage and laborers. Imitating just half of the engagement that the *catadores* have with the dump—like them, he gleaned for the materials he deemed useful, but he never depended on the garbage heaps for sustenance—, Vik Muniz went to the ramp—the place in the landfill where trucks unload, and where the main process of collection takes place—and collected the only materials he was interested in for their potential recyclable value: the image of the workers striking poses that were recognizable in the art market.

From the walls of museums and galleries from São Paulo to Zurich and New York City, garbage delineated the features of Carlão posing as Atlas (fig. 8), the mythic titan-turned-mountain, in charge of keeping the earth and the heavens separate. The *catador*, as a disenfranchised worker, is indeed a demiurge who deals in creating and sustaining life from commodities that have been. As part of this now famous series, this image of a man turned into a heap of wreckage has gained visibility throughout the world, but it is the unruliest figure of the bunch. As opposed to the mythic character imagined by Il Guercino and reproduced by Muniz (fig. 3), Carlão, the worker, stares back at the public, who can glimpse at a symptomatic image of their own historical moment. One can only speculate that the confrontative character of figure 3 (and maybe that of the model) was the reason for its exclusion from the well-resolved narrative of Lucy Walker's film.

The second half of the engagement of the *catadores* with the dump, which Muniz failed to imitate, is the worker's dependence on the organic garbage to gather food. Besides plastic and paper to sell, the workers of Jardim Gramacho sift through plastic bags for salvageable food. They call it *podrão* (the big rotten), as euphemisms have no place where the dregs of the city go to die their collective death. The name evokes the paradoxical relationship that the worker has with the most offensive kind of waste: Rotten food provides a means for survival, but it also embodies the ever-present threat of illness and death that looms over the dump. This paradox is at the core of the precariousness of the experience of the garbage worker.

Organic matter communicates its double nature to the *catador* through a unified language: smell. In Jardim Gramacho, noses are trained to discern danger from nourishment, and in a very concrete way they safeguard the integrity of the whole body. Smell is also the most conspicuous absence in *Imagens de lixo*. Odor is the gateway to the dump, as anyone who has ever set foot on the premises can attest. The smell of putrefying matter, the heat that such a process generates, and the constant

tremor under one's feet produced by the movement of the trucks on unstable ground conjure the sense of precariousness that never abandons the daily toil of the *catadores*. Renouncing the mythological thread and following the trail of smell, another dimension of the landfill starts to come into focus.

— 6 —

It is only fitting for such a monumental city as Rio de Janeiro that Jardim Gramacho—where 80% of the city's daily load of 8,000 tons of trash is buried—is the largest landfill in Latin America. Covering an area of 1.3 million square meters and rising 40 meters above sea level, this garbage dump is located outside the municipality of Rio, on the Bahia de Guanabara, in the municipality of Duque de Caxias in the Baixada Fluminense.

According to Lúcio Vianna Alves, general administrator of the landfill, Jardim Gramacho receives 8,000 tons of waste between domestic refuse, which comprises 90 percent of the total, and the rest is medical waste from hospitals and laboratories (Romero Rivera "Personal Interview with Lúcio Vianna Alves in Jardim Gramacho"). Of all the domestic trash, only around 30 to 35 percent is made up by recyclable materials to be found, sorted, transported and resold by the *catadores*. The remaining 65 to 70 percent is organic matter and other non-recyclable refuse, which is laid on the ground by a continuous stream of trucks in what is known as "the ramp"—where the selection and collection of recyclables and food takes place. The unwanted rest is then pressed and covered with a layer of gravel to prepare the site to receive a new load of waste.

Having began its operations more than 30 years ago in 1978, Jardim Gramacho has grown into a mountain of more than 40 meters (130 feet) high. In the late 1970s there was less consciousness about environmental issues, says Alves, and the dump was built in an ecologically sensitive area. The Bahia de Guanabara is a swamp with a fragile tectonic substratum; therefore, if left unmonitored, the growing mountain of debris would reach a weight greater than the bedrock can hold, causing it to break, and three decades worth of polluting matter would ooze into the stream of the Bahia, causing incalculable devastation to the ecosystem.

In 1994, the municipal government (the Prefeitura de Duque de Caxias) determined that Jardim Gramacho needed a complete revamp to comply with higher environmental standards. Before this year, this was a dump *a céu aberto*, meaning the waste it received was just piled up without further treatment, and the *chorume* (toxic residual waters) drained directly into the Bahia. After 1994, Jardim Gramacho was transformed into a proper landfill: its area was delimited by a containing wall, which also made it possible to maintain better control of the population of *catadores* who worked the garbage every day. A system for collecting the residual polluting waters was installed, and a plan was made for treating the water before it reaches Bahia de Guanabara. The flammable gases that are naturally produced by the decomposing organic matter were channeled for combustion to generate the energy needed for the landfill to function. From that time on, Jardim Gramacho was not only the largest landfill on the subcontinent, but it was also the point of reference for every other major waste management facility, Brazilian and non-Brazilian alike. Still, shortly after these reforms were made, it was decided that the landfill would close its doors for good. The definite closing was to take place in 2004. It did not in fact take place; instead, a year-round team of geologists was mandated to take daily measurements of the pressure and weight distribution over the bedrock to determine if the landfill could sustain another

day of work. Were the team of geologists to declare that the bedrock had reached its breaking point, Jardim Gramacho would have had to close for business immediately.

About 50 percent of the *catadores* live in a *favela* on the outskirts of the landfill. In contrast to the exemplary organization of Jardim Gramacho, this community of shanties lacks infrastructure, and it is much more chaotic than the actual dump. There is no pavement to speak of, no sewer system, and very few electricity lines to serve a growing population that already numbers in the thousands. The community of the landfill and the surrounding *favela* is somewhat diverse; although the great majority are blacks and mulatos, young and old men and women (and even some children) work there. There are “professional” *catadores* called *maõs velhas* (old hands) who have accumulated experience working with trash in other places before Jardim Gramacho opened for business in 1978. There are also fishermen, construction workers, and factory workers all turned scavengers when the job market left them few alternatives to unemployment.

When I interviewed Tião in January 2008—four years after the first planned closing date—he was the president of the Associação de Catadores do Aterro Municipal de Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG), and he was well aware of the chaos that would ensue if the day came when the geologists said “No more, we are closing down for business.” Tião and the association he represents are concerned with securing employment alternatives for the *catadores* who would lose their jobs overnight. But even more visible than the struggle of around 2,500 scavengers, Tião knows, would be the nightmare of almost 7,000 tons of garbage that the 8 million *cariocas* would have to keep in the city every day until a new landfill opens (Romero Rivera “Personal Interview with Sebastião Carlos Dos Santos in Jardim Gramacho”).

Kathleen Millar, then a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology at Brown University, was working in Jardim Gramacho in 2008, when I first met Tião, and when Vik Muniz was in the first stages of *Imagens de Lixo*. Millar’s dissertation, *Reclaiming the Discarded: The Politics of Labor and Everyday Life on Rio’s Garbage Dump*,

explores the lives and organizing efforts of the workers of ACAMJG, whom she got to know by spending several months working shoulder to shoulder with them. Her portrait of Tião is a significant departure from Muniz's manipulated image of the young *catador*. Millar shows that Tião's profile is exceptional but not incongruous with his environment; he could not be explained or fully understood outside of the context of Jardim Gramacho.

Tião's disposition to organize the *catadores*, who do extremely hard labor in conditions of sanitary precariousness, comes from at least two sources. He is the grandson of a union organizer and the son and sibling of other *catadores*. And he was involved with several NGOs, which introduced him to *catadores* from other places in Brazil, and in Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. Together, they discuss their shared problems and the particular solutions that each group had tried out. Millar further explains the training that Tião received as a social leader.

In 2001, he participated in a Young Black Leaders group organized by a Dutch-funded NGO called IBISS (Brazilian Institute for Innovations in Public Health) that seeks to reduce violence in Rio's favelas by educating youth to become effective, positive leaders in their communities. As a Young Black Leader, Tião took courses on Brazilian history, political organizing, social movements and civil rights and met over forty other youths from favelas throughout the metropolitan area of Rio (Millar "Reclaiming the Discarded: The Politics of Labor and Everyday Life on Rio's Garbage Dump" 266-267).

Tião describes his relation to garbage as being central in his life. Working around garbage and its workers has turned into a sort of infectious passion that got under his skin and never left. This sort of spell of a place like Jardim Gramacho, as odd as it might seem, has also spread as if by contagion to Lúcio Alves, the manager of the landfill, and to many members of the staff of the health center that serves the area.

Millar warns her reader against romanticizing the figure of the *catador*, and she fully engages the two sides of the experience of working at the landfill as explained by her co-workers. On the one hand, when asked about their choice to work collecting recyclable materials and food from the garbage dump, most of the *catadores* say that this is one of the only employment alternatives that would allow them not to have a boss; the sense of freedom that they derive from working outside of a rigid structure of expected hours and results is the greatest (of very few) perks that come with spending days and nights working atop a malodorous, unstable, and dangerous mountain.

On the other hand, just as often as the dump is referred to as the *mãe rampa* (mother ramp) it is eloquently called “pure suffering.” Millar makes a constant effort to hold on to these two dimensions when she describes the working environment of the dump. This gives her narrative the chance to explore the paradox of the precariousness of so-called “informal economy” workers, who adapt to and find a way to function within the same system that has forced them out of more traditional and stable occupations. There is a great deal of suffering involved, but there is also a fragile freedom to adapt the political lessons of the past (Tião’s grandfather, lest we forget, was a union leader) to the more fluctuating and unstable conditions of the present.

There is nothing precarious about Vik Muniz’s portraits of the *catadores* of Jardim Gramacho. There is always a moment in his process of composition where the objects he uses are carefully and precariously arranged on the floor without anything to hold them in position. That fragility is obliterated when the artist takes a photograph of the composition, turning it into a flat statement of the artist’s own craftsmanship, instead of being an embodiment of the world in which the posing models live, day in and day out. Ultimately, Muniz’s artwork is solely about art. He bends the material he most closely associates with his home country, namely garbage, and he starts making a gesture towards historically situated problems, but this gesture ends up returning to the core of the art market without ever having really left it. Trash and its workers are just

recyclable materials in Muniz's hands, making it seem as though he found a way to reinsert the lives of these people back into mainstream capital production and circulation through art. He fails to notice, however, that he is reinserting merely a dried up shell, emptied out of the organic dimension that he discarded along with putrefying and foul-smelling trash.

Maybe here we can find a clue to explain Carlão's confrontative expression in his portrait and its subsequent exclusion from the self-congratulatory device that is the movie *Waste Land*. Having had the experience of participating in a worker's association, the *catador* is fully aware of the injustice implicit in the myth of Atlas: The core of the "magic" that transforms the titan into a mountain is a violently unequal distribution of power. For Carlão, being forced into a position that secures the distance between the terrestrial realm (organic life of garbage) and the celestial (art and other luxury markets) is not the stuff of Greek mythology, but the very reality in which the *catador* finds himself at the moment of striking that pose for Vik Muniz. He also knows that any change in his condition will be the result of his own work, and neither divine intervention nor "the power of art".

Teresa Margolles's Work from SEMEFO to the Venice Biennial

— 1 —

From May 25 to July 10 of the year 1994, the clean lines of glass, concrete and stone of the halls of Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (MACG) of Mexico City served as a contrasting medium to the suspended organic decay of an exhibition by a relatively unknown Mexican art collective called SEMEFO. The moniker was the short form for “Servicio Médico Forense,” the forensic pathology branch of the Mexican judicial system, roughly equivalent to the coroner’s office. The members of the collective were all artist trained as coroners, who in 1990 started producing performances exploring violence as a social currency using scatological imagery as their medium. These first pieces were raw in their impetus to show the obscene character of the human body as the material support for displays of cruelty.

The Carrillo Gil exhibit showcased a more matured formal proposal whose thematic center was the animal mortal remains. With these works, SEMEFO wanted to comment on the violence that determines most instances of the relation of the human with the animal, or more specifically with *animality*, which alludes not only to non human sentient creatures, but to the bodily life that the human animal shares with them. The notions of taboo and abjection, which represent the socially determined limits of the life of the human body, refer almost exclusively to bodily phenomena deemed transgressive or disruptive of the social tissue of the status quo.

Lavatio Corporis was the name of the Carrillo Gil exhibition, and it referred to the cleansing of a dead body before an autopsy or a process of embalming. It is the last rite for a living subject and the act that inaugurates what SEMEFO refers to as “the life of

the cadaver.” The *pièce de résistance* in that occasion was a carousel whose frame was a rusted metal structure that supported the embalmed bodies of five still-born colts (fig. 12).



Figure 12. SEMEFO, *Lavatio Corporis*, 1994 (Springer).

The success of the piece (and of the entire exhibition) rested on the economy of the image it evoked. The physical reaction of repulsion to the sight and smell of the colts’

embalmed bodies triggered in the viewers a string of associations at a double level of history: a biographical one of each human animal and a social one that alluded to by the specific moment and place of the exhibit. At the biographical level, the image of the carousel and the group of colts point towards childhood (in Mexico, the colloquial name for the carousel is “los caballitos” or “the little horses”), but the sharp edges of the structure, the menacing bed of nails covering its floor, and the rusted surface of the metal complete an image of torture, of which, one can only assume, the young dead bodies of the colts are the victims. Childhood as evoked by this image is an age of utter vulnerability in a context of pervasive danger and cruelty. Children and animals are here deployed as metonymic embodiments of the precariousness of the bodily life, which fully grown human animals can never completely conquer, but whose acuteness must be kept in check for them to properly function as productive members of society. The fully grown horse is a symbol of potency, of the libidinal energy that signifies the triumphant pursuit of life over death and decay; cut short, the life of the dead bodies of the colts signifies the violent arrest of libidinal *puissance* of the human animal.

At the historical level that ties the work of this art collective to a specific time and place, the image of horses could be related to the discovery and subsequent violent conquest of the indigenous peoples of what then came to be known as America by the Spanish colonizers. Horses and gunpowder were instrumental in the annihilation perpetrated by the Europeans, and in 1994 —merely two years after the commemoration of the Fifth Centennial of the landing of Columbus in what he called San Salvador Island— they were synonymous with the cruelty and violence of the pillage of the “New World” by the Spanish Crown.

During the second half of the 1990s, the work of SEMEFO left the abattoir for the morgue. With this transfer, the work of the group grew more concerned with the direct social implications of the violent death of specific human animals. The attention to the bodily dimension of human existence continued, but it abandoned the more abstract

preoccupations with taboo and cruelty that evidenced more clearly the reading list of the members of the group (which included Bataille, Artaud, and Burroughs among others), than their direct experience with specific instances of violence. This initial disposition changed once they started working in and around the morgue, where the bodies they received were sometimes unclaimed because nobody knew who they were, and sometimes they ended up in such dark corner of the bureaucratic maze because their families had no money to bury them. But, other circumstances notwithstanding, almost always these bodies had been victims of violent deaths, and the marks of such violence did not disappear after or limited its effects to the instant of death. The ripples of these deaths reached the outside of the morgue, where its effects were tangible in the suffering they cause to the relatives.

— 2 —

Teresa Margolles, a founding member of the collective, was instrumental in effecting the change of direction of the collective work from a theoretical ontological abstraction to a historically situated, socially embedded work. She started gaining individual visibility as the end of the last decade of the 20th century drew near, and her voice started defining the tone of the collective's endeavors, such as the series *Catafalcos* (Catafalques), of which figure 13 is part.

If there is a fundamental opacity to violence as a sensorially communicable phenomenon, in other words, if the experience of violence escapes any form of representation that would adequately communicate its phenomenological content to the spectator, then the task that SEMEFO undertook during the late 1990s was to find ways to allude to the violence experienced by the bodies in the morgue by perpetrating a

different but akin experience of sensorial shock. Interested as they were in the “life of the cadaver,” they devised a formal apparatus to capture it in the morgue, and later exhibit it in the museum or gallery.



Figure 13. Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO, *Catafalco*, 1997 (Scott Bray 23).

The language they used to accomplish this undertaking was that of the things: of a human life turned into a thing after it was striped down from its social investiture, of the things surrounding that life at the moment of its cancelation, of the things that witnessed and kept the imprint of the new organic life that started after the person

became a thing. These things that made out the later work of SEMEFO were sensorially apprehensible, and they affected the spectator through sight and smell. They did not overcome the phenomenological opacity of violence, but they were capable of triggering new instances of the affective phenomena that accompanies violence when the public encountered them, even in the sanitized and safely connoted environment of the museum.



Figure 14. Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO, *Dermis*, 1996 (Scott Bray 19).

With *Catafalcos* (1997), they continued the idea that previously ruled *Dermis* (1996), an earlier series by the group in which they exhibited a collection of sheets used to cover the bodies after an autopsy were stained with the fluids of the body as well as with those that the coroner used. The resulting images (fig. 14) were spectral portraits that evoked the precise lines of the absent bodies, making the sheet-canvas a *thing* pregnant

with the aura of death by having been in direct contact with the cadaver. Bodily fluids of the once-living body, like blood and fat, combine with the water of the cleansing and the formaldehyde of the treatment of the cadaver to constitute a homogenized effluvia that preserves the image of the great absence which is death, supplanting it with the evidence of decomposed life, one that is no longer organized as a single body, and lives in the threshold between the animality of the body and the inanimate materiality of the *thing*.

The visible dimension of “the life of the cadaver” is impregnated in *things*, bestowing a spectral aura in them, which produces a reaction in the viewer similar to (although less drastic than) the one a corpse itself would. And the mechanism of the aesthetic experience that pieces like figures 13 and 14 produce does not pass through a purely visual phenomenon, not even when it is paired with a smell associated with organic decay. The “punch in the gut” that these pieces treat their public to comes from when the organic index of the visual and the olfactory combine with the information of the piece which confirms the suspicions that the spectator would have already started harboring. This mechanism comments on the intricate relation between opacity and revelation in the work by Teresa Margolles with SEMEFO. If their earlier works bluntly pointed to the sensorially tangible animality of the life of the cadaver, their late proposals seem to ask the question “What does violence and the pain it causes feel like?” And in the absence of a satisfactory answer that can be transmitted to their public, they opt to exalt the opacity of such experiences by putting it in tension with partial disclosures of information that infuse the inscrutable *things* with an unexpected auratic power.



Figure 15. Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO, *Memoria Fossilizada*, 1998 (Scott Bray 25).

Memoria Fossilizada (Fossilized Memory, fig. 15), a slab of concrete of 4 x 95 x 95 inches, does not betray any specific relation to the cadavers at the morgue that the group worked with. As a *thing*, *Memoria Fossilizada* was completely opaque to the point where it was very puzzling to imagine what attribute made it worthy of its work of art status. The spectator had to come to the little explanatory plaque (or read the accompanying caption in a book or online) to realize that before poring in the concrete, the artists had arranged the belongings of 247 victims of violence whose dead bodies wound up in the morgue of Mexico City. Small personal effects such as jewelry, wallets, cards, keys, money bills, coins, pieces of paper, lipsticks, combs, handkerchiefs remained on the person's body, or inside pockets or purses, up to the moment of death. Unclaimed, as the victims themselves, this collection is an extension of the abandonment that most of the cadavers at the morgue are destined to. The corpses along with their belongings fall out of public visibility, as though they had ceased existing also in the plane of the

material when they abandon the realm of the social. *Memoria Fosilizada* insists on that invisibility, heightening it by making physically inaccessible inside their concrete bed, much like the body they once accompanied, which lies most likely in a common grave, anonymous, its memory accessible only as an abstract notion of expired materiality.

The *things* that make up the pieces by the later SEMEFO and subsequently by Teresa Margolles squarely fit in the definition of waste by an economic definition, since they are objects that have been depleted (just as the cadavers) from the productive value they once possessed. The morgue is similar to the landfill in that they are both liminal spaces between productivity and scatology, which are deemed marginal for their visibility, but central for their role in maintaining the proper functioning of the system of production of value. To a large degree, the circumstances to which these *things* are forced in the morgue and in the gallery would also apply to the cadavers with which they were in contact, but the implications of using anonymous corpses as part of a body of artwork would prove too sensorially overwhelming to allow any discussion beyond the shocking character of the exhibition. The waste, the detritus, the effluvia that came *from* the corpses, but that are different from it, preserve the auratic power of the life of the cadaver, which explodes in the middle of the museum floor triggered by sensorial indexes coupled with a textual explanation of the origin of the objects that the spectator faces.

— 3 —

When Teresa Margolles started working as a solo artist in 2000, she continued exhibiting material objects that bore the marks of the life of the cadavers she worked with at the morgue. One of her first solo exhibitions included the piece *Lienzo (Shroud,*

fig. 16), a 374 x 67 inches piece of cloth soaked in formaldehyde that had been used to preserve and store nine corpses in the morgue for a period of ten months. In this case, the element of smell was more important than in other comparable series by SEMEFO, such as *Dermis*. The length of the storage of the nine bodies and the saturation of formaldehyde in the fibers of the cloth gave it an overpowering smell that could not associated with anything other than decaying flesh.



Figure 16. Teresa Margolles, *Lienzo (Shroud)*, 1999-2000 (Scott Bray 26-27).

This piece showcased Margolles's return to using the immediateness of the organicity of the body, to animality and organic decay, which was extended by a series of photographs titled *Autorretratos (Self-portraits)*, in which the artist was photographed inside the morgue posing along with cadavers, and sometimes even holding young corpses in her arms, exposing them for the camera. In this period in the early 2000s, the morgue was the epicenter of Margolles's work, and maybe more than ever before, it was a place that the general population started encountering more often as part of the social imaginary.

Forensic medicine stopped being that dark corner of the judicial system which the regular citizen seldom had any interaction with. The steady rise of violence that Mexico witnessed from the mid 1990s with a series of high-profile assassinations and public

deaths or recognizable political and criminal figures (from the Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo to Luis Donaldo Colosio) opened a space in the public imagination for the forensic investigation of crime scenes and abated bodies. By the mid 2000s, the scale of violence in Mexico was so monstrous that newspapers and other sources of the public visual culture were already saturated with images of decapitated men and women and raped and strangled young women. To mount an exhibition showing personal effects or blood stained sheets in 2006 would have had a completely different topic significance than the one it had back in the early 1990s. Violence and suffering became part of the language of a politics of fear and power struggles. And the general population found itself in the crossfire between the official forces of the government and the much more powerful and wide-reaching arm of drug-trafficking. There was no point in showcasing the opacity of violence, when it was visible in all the Mexican territory. So the geographical divisions that Margolles began exploring were not those between the morgue and the rest of the city, or even ultra violent cities like Juárez and the rest of the country, but those that separate wealth from poverty, Mexico from the United States, or from the rest of the world.

The new work of Margolles of this period aptly traces the dissemination of violence, which becomes pervasive, reaching all the folds of the social tissue, but is also less effective in creating awareness of an imminent social danger. As the media makes public the sight of dismembered bodies and the ineffectual intervention of the justice system, the shock of seeing the evidence of a violent death wears off, and it is replaced by a numbing adjustment to the forms of precariousness conjured by the new status quo. This is the context in which *Vaporización* (*Vaporization*, fig. 17) and *En el Aire* (*In the Air*, fig. 18) were created.



Figure 17. Teresa Margolles, *Vaporización* (*Vaporization*), 2001 (Godfrey 109).

Vaporización was an installation for which Margolles used a vapor-producing machine to fill out a room with a subtle mist that diffused the light and allowed the public to see only as far as a couple of feet in front of them. This saturated environment produced an aesthetically pleasing effect to the eye, while it also represented a visual obstacle and a shrinking of the subjective area of vision. The contact of the vaporized water against the clothes and skin of the spectators completed the sensorial stimulation that the artist wanted to accomplish with this piece. However, the effect of the piece was not fully achieved until the spectator came about the plaque with the description of the materials involved in the installation. The water that the spectator had been soaking in, revealed the text, had been used in the morgue for the *lavatio corporis* of victims of violent deaths. The further explanation about how the artist had sterilized the water so there was no real threat of contamination to fear, did little to counter the effect of shock and fear that the information brought upon the spectator.

The sight of the violence needed not to be restated by an artistic intervention, since that image was already part of the social imaginary in 2001 Mexico; what needed to be combated was the numbness product of overexposure to those violent images. The strategy that Margolles uses here is to involve all the public by sharing in the material evidence of violence. For Mexican and international publics alike, it was relatively easy back in 2001 not to feel directly threatened by the news of Quiché communities being massacred in the middle of the night in the sierra of Chiapas, or by the image of young

female workers of the *maquiladoras* raped, tortured and assassinated in Ciudad Juárez Chihuahua. *Vaporización* attempts to shorten the distance between the museum-goer and the victims of site-specific instances violence. The water from the posthumous cleansing process used in a morgue, normally reaches the sewer system, it gets treated and goes back to the city above ground as tap water. Thus, what Margolles does with this piece is not shocking because it forces an artificial situation of encounter between the material remains of anonymous deaths and regular, law-abiding citizens; its force comes from the forced revelation that the museum-going citizen is always already included in the cycle of production of violence—of which, indifference, has always been an important enabler.

The utilization of vapor is also reminiscent of the ritual practice of the *temazcal* (from the Náhuatl meaning “house of vapor”), which is still used today in some parts of Mexico and Central America as a means of purifying the body after events such as child-birthing or the loss of a loved one. In a special tent-like structure come the person to be purified and a guide who pours water or medicinal infusions on a hot stone while he or she offers spiritual guidance to accomplish the task at hand. The difference with Margolles’s piece is that the element of heat and therapeutic sweating were absent; the mist in the museum hall just clung to the street clothes, instead of mixing with the sweat coming from the inside of the body of the spectator. Purification was not the goal in *Vaporización*, but the artist did operate as a sort of ritualistic guide who proposed an examination of the public’s connection to other fellow human beings.

En el Aire (fig. 18) uses the water from the *lavatio corporis* as well, but the strategy of the installation was different from *Vaporización* in that instead of creating a dissemination of the material (the water), it followed more of a monistic configuration, creating bubbles that burst on contact with the bodies of the public or the floor.



Figure 18. Teresa Margolles, *En el Aire* (*In the Air*), 2003 (Godfrey 108).

There was no physical opacity in this installation (it was possible to see the entirety of the room and of the bubbles), but there was a lack of transparency of the component of violence hidden behind the apparently benign character of the bubbles. Fragile as life itself, the bubbles work as a rather visually attractive *memento mori*, which carries with it the precarious trace of the life of the cadaver. The lightness associated with the image of a room full of soap bubbles contrasts with the ominous tone of the title of the piece. What is “in the air” is the growing presence of violent deaths in Mexico in 2003, and what appears to be a pretty spectacle is in deed a monument to the precariousness of life, of which we become aware once it touches us directly.

In December 2006, the government of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa declared war on drug trafficking in Mexican territory, leaping into an abysmal endeavor whose

dimensions and costs seem not to have been properly assessed. Between 2006 and 2012 the casualties of this war are numbered in the several tens of thousands; the Mexican people are seeing levels of extreme violence that had not been witnessed since the Revolution of the early twentieth century.

— 4 —

Teresa Margolles was selected as the artist to represent Mexico at the 53rd Venice Biennial in 2009, with an exhibition called *¿De Qué Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar? (What Else Could We Talk About?)* curated by Cuahutémoc Medina. Just one year before the celebration of the second centennial of Mexico's independence from Spain, and the first centennial of the Revolution, the participation of the country in an international artistic forum was defined not by a celebratory revision of national identity, but by a reflection on why such celebration was impeded by the current historical circumstances.

Margolles's intervention in Venice showed the impossibility of producing a celebratory discourse of national identity when the country witnessed the most gruesome wave of violence seen in decades, even for a cultural project sponsored by the Mexican state. Mexico had not been a permanently represented country in the Biennial until the year 2007, when it came back with a show by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and curated by Príamo Lozada and Bárbara Perea. This timeline means that Mexico established its presence in Venice once the "*Guerra Contra el Narco*" (*War on Drug Trafficking*) was underway.

Margolles's usual sensibility to underrepresented forms of violence was on display in one of the most prominent stages for artistic productions, which is still structured around the notion that national identities as a coherent set of ideological traits are apprehensible through the work of the artists that they produce. The title *¿De Qué Otra*

Cosa Podemos Hablar? is a challenging gesture towards the national discourse of cultural production; it is as though she is saying to the Mexican State “So, you want me to produce Mexican art? Well, this is the only kind possible under the present circumstances: an art that speaks of violence, death, precariousness, and fear as part of the quotidian lives of all Mexicans.”

Vaporización and *En el Aire* were about the dissemination of the mark of violence as a floating matter that eventually seated on top of the skin of the spectators, turning them into depositories of a small amount of the life of the cadaver. But by 2009, the material traces of violent deaths had seeped deep into the Mexican social fabric; speaking from a materialist point of view, the violence derived from the war on drug-trafficking had a very clear economic component. Money—great quantities of it—is the core problem of Felipe Calderón’s *Guerra Contra el Narco*. The discrepancy between the budgets that the government and the cartels have available to fight the war should suffice to explain the ineffectiveness of the governmental efforts. Corruption at all levels of the judicial and executive systems is still the status quo in Mexico today, despite the repeated attempts by the government to eradicate it as a necessary condition for the success of the war. So lucrative and pervasive is drug trafficking that it is practically impossible to gauge the extent of its contribution to the macro and micro economic realms. Violence is inseparable from money in this context, so the material reality of Mexico at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century bears the indelible mark of both money and violence derived from the drug trade. Effluvia from the executed bodies soaks streets, houses, and dirt roads. In a similar manner, drug-money permeates the economy and all the tangible manifestations that are the result of the system of production of value.

¿De Qué Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar? turns the attention to this phenomenon. The thing is not only juxtaposed to a violent scene, nor does it keep the material remnants of that violence on its surface, but this time the *thing* includes the trace of violence as one

of its structural components. *Mesa* (Table, fig. 19) is a piece of furniture made out of concrete and the effluvia recovered from the ground where a person was assassinated. The table is the *thing* (*cosa*) alluded in the title of the exhibit, it is the place of the symptomatic discourse of violence that, according to Margolles, makes any other discourse impossible—this is the only *thing* we could possibly talk about.



Figure 19. Teresa Margolles, *Mesa (Table)*, 2009 (Margolles et al. 34).

The halls of the Palazzo Rota Ivancich were the designated space for the Mexican Pavillion at the Biennial. In architectural or even archeological terms, this is a fascinating space which shows its own process of decaying majesty, but from the point of view of the museography, it imposed significantly more restrictions than the tridimensional clean slates that galleries or contemporary museums that often housed Margolles's affecting pieces. The way that the artist found to work around those restrictions was to play with the tensions between opacity and transparency, between

presence and absence, which resulted in an exhibition that used minimal visible intervention to leave a deep and significant trace in the space that contained it.



Figures 20 and 21. Teresa Margolles, *Limpieza* (*Cleaning*), 2009 (Margolles et al. 38, 47).

Beyond a few scattered unobtrusive objects like the concrete table, a flag and an extended canvas (reminiscent of *Lienzo*), the main intervention in the Palazzo Rota Ivancich was the daily cleaning of the floors and windows shown in figures 20 and 21 using rehydrated rags that had previously being soaked in blood and other substances from the places where people were assassinated, then left to dry, so as to facilitate their transportation from Mexico to Venice.



Figures 22 and 23. Teresa Margolles, *Limpieza (Cleaning)*, 2009 (Margolles et al. 36.37).

The artist decided that such cleanings would be done every day for the six months that the exhibition was to be in place. After the more than 180 cleanings, the material traces of a geographically distant violence would be part of the structure of the Venetian palace, turning this building into an un-dead object: the aristocratic ruin inseparable from the sticky, organic remnant left by a violent, anonymous death. *Limpieza* is an eloquent expression of the qualitative difference between the notions of ruin and the remainder; the first one is associated with a dignified reflection on history, the latter, a shameful, improper trace of a minor biography. The obscene trace of violence was not figuratively alluded to (unlike in *Lienzo*) in Margolles's Venice intervention, but this opacity was paired with a more pervasive interaction of the remainder with the world of *things*. The only representation of the nation that Margolles deemed possible was a symptomatic smearing of the life of the (many a) cadaver onto the material (spatial, sensorial) context in which the Mexican national identity was invoked.

Garbage: history, nature, image, and smell

— 1 —

To travel from north to south, New York to Buenos Aires, via Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, is inevitably an exercise in comparison. The streets in all these cities share a vitality that makes them pulsate uninterrupted all night and day, and there are even communicating vessels extended among them that make up a continental tissue in constant flux. What differentiates the cities is not only topography, language, ethnicity, history and economy, but also the fact that they are each a part of a larger body, and they are different parts with different assigned roles in keeping that body alive.

Strolling down Fifth Avenue in New York City, Avenida Presidente Mazaryk in Mexico City, Rua Garcia D'Avila in Rio de Janeiro, or Avenida Alvear in Buenos Aires, one could hardly tell the difference among these fashionable streets. They are filled with the same flagship high-end stores; in their window displays, diamonds, cashmere, silk, and fur stare passersby in the eye, igniting the same intimate yearning. Their sidewalks are populated by virtually identical people carrying look-alike shopping bags and wrapped in the same intoxicating mix of expensive perfume and spending lust. A neuralgic center of the continental body is found in these streets: They teach us what and how to desire, and they teach to all equally although those able to actually act on these teachings are only a selected few.

Moving away from these streets, one can see the organic specificity of these different places. The apple of the eye—fabric, plastic, luxurious juice, alluring form—is transfixed by the alchemy of time and place into indifferent or downright repulsive matter: Today's object of desire is tomorrow's trash. Desire accompanies commodities even after they are discarded—but it is an inverted desire: the imperious need to get as

far away from it as soon as possible. Waste travels, not only from the curb to the landfill, but also from the top to the bottom of the continental body.

Garbage is an inverted form of wealth which, just as the neoliberal discourse of recent decades worked so hard to convince us, trickles down from richer to poorer, only in this case it really does: It moves southward. On March 22, 1987, a barge left New York City carrying 3,500 tons of local solid waste and followed a consuetudinary route that served to alleviate the lack of landfill acreage in the Empire State. This time, however, after a five-month journey of more than 6,000 miles, the barge returned home full, after being rejected by Mexico, Belize, The Bahamas, and a few other places, presenting a blockage to its route (Bartz). This event was a notable exception, an anomaly in the otherwise fluid waste trade between the North and South, the First World and the Third World. Even after environmental laws made it illegal for Mexico, Brazil, or Argentina to serve as dumping ground for foreign waste, the effluence of the North continues to “trickle down” onto these nations’ more impoverished regions under false pretenses, claiming to be recycled material—or even humanitarian aid.

Garbage is part of the reality of every city. But even though the most burdensome materials in today’s garbage (plastics and other forms of packaging) were developed in the industrialized nations, they are more conspicuous in impoverished areas everywhere, especially in developing nations. Admittedly, most of the trash in the landfills of Buenos Aires Province, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, or in suburban Mexico City comes from those cities; the same rich-to-poor dynamic trickle-down route is reproduced at these sites, albeit on a smaller scale. So even if every member of society produces trash every day, a quotidian landscape of mountains of trash is the province of only the poor. The continental organism assigns itself different parts, and the role of economically depressed sites outside big cities in Latin America is to be the continent’s dumping grounds.

The biggest of these dumps in the region, as we saw, is Jardim Gramacho, the landfill that daily piles up 80% of the domestic and municipal garbage produced in the “Marvelous City,” Rio de Janeiro. There is a strong sense of urgency and danger in Jardim Gramacho: An important battle was fought and lost and the remains of what has been and its remains lie on the ground as tell-tale archaeological vestiges. The sight of Jardim Gramacho evokes a cemetery, or a battlefield. A sanctified and repulsive site, it offers its observer quite a complex image, much like a photographic negative, of overabundance and overindulgence: the trash of today points to luxuries past. If one were to stand on top of the freshest heap of Jardim Gramacho while the uninterrupted beeline of trucks unload their cargo, two things would be apparent besides the smell: the frantic activity of *catadores* buzzing around each new load, and the tremor underneath one’s feet, a reminder that this is not stable ground. It is the cumulative result of four decades of consumption. Urgency and danger are the signs of the landfill.

Garbage bears the imprint of the past. It is a part of the natural world that bears the mark of history. So, by selecting fragments of debris and putting them next to each other, a materialist historian can evoke a constellation of questions about past and present. If the task of the historian is to rescue an image flashing before her eyes in a moment of danger, and the landfill is a cemetery for past generations of desires on the brink of being lost, then garbage ought to be a fertile ground for the materialist historian.

The work of Marcelo Cohen, Vik Muniz, and Teresa Margolles shows the multifaceted life of garbage in twenty first century Latin America. Produced within a short span of time of each other, *Donde yo no estaba* (2006), *Imagens de lixo* (2008), and *¿De Qué Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* (2009) showcase complex images that straddle the distance between life and death, dispossession and overabundance, things and humans. They are part of the cultural tissue that receives and preserves the imprint of the past sifted through the sieve of literature and art. And their analysis reveals mechanisms

and patterns of incorporation of the materiality of waste back into the system of value that produced it in the first place. These textual and visual images of the remainder circulate, thus affecting the historical circumstance of their place of production. History makes its trace visible in waste, the image of waste is incorporated into cultural products, which are distributed and consumed, and in this form, waste leaves its own mark in history.

— 2 —

Garbage is nature. More specifically, it is, in part, something in the external, sensory world, and in part alienated human nature. It is part of the external, sensory world because it is part of the material reality that exists outside the human body, apprehensible by sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste (and these afferent stimuli are processed by human consciousness and decoded as part of its inorganic inner representation of the world). We know trash and we recognize it when we smell it. It is in part alienated human nature because garbage is a byproduct of human labor. Being a transformed commodity, garbage embodies the time and energy necessary for a sustained and structured human intervention in the external, sensorial world. When we see and smell garbage we see and smell discarded labor power.

Standing atop a heap of fresh garbage in a landfill is a completely different experience than reaching the top of any other type of mountain. The affect that connects us to that specific part of our perceived material reality that is garbage is usually dominated by a deeply seeded repulsion; how is it that this particular corner of nature which is not spontaneously-occurring, but which bears the mark of an intimate relation to human industriousness, can revolt its human witness with such a powerful

nauseating blow? The answer, no doubt, is related to our response to the process of organic decay; the smell of death, of the transition of tissue into simpler elements, affects us instinctively in as much as we are finite organic matter as well. And maybe it is not only that we share the materiality of waste; could it be that the repulsion is only more intense when we intuit something human trashed along with the detritus?

We produce garbage. We do not simply coexist with it as part of nature. In abstract terms, garbage has always accompanied human production, so it could be considered a transhistorical occurrence. On the other hand, standing at the top of a trash heap, all abstractions would be interrupted by the concrete materiality of the sensorial experience of waste, therefore placing us at a concretely material historical moment. The human mode of producing and discarding waste has changed in time, therefore rendering waste a viable location to contemplate the historical processes that defined each specific mode. Landfills cut their own recognizable notch in history. They are the historical mark of a highly developed form of capitalism.

Although the landfill has been one of the most common forms of disposal of waste throughout history, in the last two centuries these places have suffered a transformation that bears witness to the parallel transformation of the forms of capital accumulation of commodities. Both contents and volume of the garbage repositories were altered by the industrial innovations and the economic climate of the capitalist societies they served. The capitalist forms of production determined the capitalist forms of garbage; the same dialectical relationship established by capital between humans and nature finds its continuation at the rear end of the production-circulation-consumption cycle in the form of a new dialectic between humans and garbage.

In general terms, a commodity is devoid of exchange value once it is purchased and exits the circulation cycle. However, garbage has its own exchange value, which is different and independent from the value that it represented earlier. This value is transitory and derives from the desire and necessity to distance oneself from the

commodity, instead of possessing it. Garbage comes back from the grave of domestic disposal as an “undead” commodity, whose exchange value originates in repulsion instead of desire, and that value will be reaped by someone other than the original buyer who took the commodity out of circulation. This “undead” commodity has a short lifespan that begins at the curb and ends underground.

The exchange value that garbage represents is reaped, first, by the waste management industry. Being an “undead” and undesired commodity, waste provokes an inversion of the usual economic exchange pattern: In this case, the buyer—the waste management company—receives both the commodity and the money. In exchange, the company offers collection, transportation, processing, sorting, and recycling of the commodity in question.

The great majority of today’s garbage finds its final resting place in landfills of different types, at which point, only a minimal part of the trashed paper, plastic, glass, and metal will be scavenged by companies or individuals to extract value from it by selling or processing these materials for recycling. This represents the second way in which garbage can be seen as a repository of capital, returning the original commodity into economic circulation as raw material.

This “second life” of the capital in the commodity that has become garbage ends when the waste management company puts it to rest in an ever-growing pile. Once fresh trash is laid on top of older layers of a similar nature in a landfill, the older trash is divested of all exchange value. Not much has changed in the composition of the garbage as it moved from the curb to the landfill, except for maybe a more advanced stage of decomposition, and of course its location. Time and space are what make used commodities profitable, if only for a small window of time.

One final form of harvesting value from disposed of commodities is represented by scavenging practices. People all over the world live in and off of garbage dumps, finding food and construction materials for personal use. This residual value is

different from exchange value; it is the value derived from the very materiality of garbage, which *catadores* use directly to sustain themselves. This residual value is part of what remains in garbage even after the last scrap of capital has been extracted from it.

What remains in garbage is a composite of 1) matter that was extracted from nature, and as such is part of the inorganic body of men and women, 2) use-value to a greater extent than a hundred years ago, since commodities today are not used up until the point of exhaustion of their use-value, 3) traces of a particular type and amount of human labor to transform raw materials into a commodity, 4) and by extension of the latter—because human labor is human species-life alienated—there is alienated human nature in a discarded commodity as well as in a pristine one.

Matter, human activity, human nature, and use-value make up the contents of those interminable, putrid mountains that are the landscape of landfills. If accumulation of commodities (and the extraction of the surplus value materialized in them) is one of the goals of capitalist production-consumption, and if the last stage of such accumulation is directly embodied in the contents of landfills today, then standing atop an odorous heap of garbage, we witness not an unfortunate by-product of high capitalism, but the material evidence of its undeniable triumph.

— 3 —

Garbage as materiality is part of the inorganic human nature, the cumulus of objects outside human subjectivity. It is not just any part of nature—there is an important difference between a tree and a pile of trashed sheets of paper, after all—but a particular kind that we could name “intervened nature” to highlight the mediation of human

labor on a particular natural object. Trash is a bearer of a human mark on matter, and as such is itself a marker of time: It denotes the temporal schism that separates raw materials from commodities, useful objects from useless ones, objects of desire from rejected effluence. And at the center of all these differentiations, there is material transformation and organic decay, as well as more subjective temporal continuities and interruptions.

Human beings alter nature in time, and inscribed in the objects produced and later discarded there is the attestation of human transitoriness, as well as all its products—economic systems, politics, and history among them. Garbage, thus, can be interpreted economically, politically, and historically. Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* engaged fragments of detritus to read them historically, establishing early on the relation between history and nature, as he demonstrated it in the project. Susan Buck-Morss reads the critical political implications of this relationship in her book *The Dialectics of Seeing*, where she quotes the philosopher's "axiom to avoid mythic thinking," extracted from an early note of the *Arcades Project*:

"No historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter." The method relies on juxtaposing binary pairs of linguistic signs from the language code (history / nature), and, in the process of applying these signs to material referents, crossing the switches. The critical power of this maneuver depends on both the code, wherein meaning arises from binaries of signifier / signifieds independent of the referents, and the referents, the materially existing objects, which do not submit to language signs meekly, but have the semantic strength to set the signs into question (Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing* : Walter Benjamin and the *Arcades Project* 59-60).

In the present analysis, garbage and other types of remainders would be the material referents, which, because they exist independently of the binary code of nature / history

possess enough semantic strength to “cross the switches” and set up a dialectic of the relation between history and nature. Garbage is nature intervened and garbage can be read historically, but that could never imply that nature and history, as mediated by the remainder, are identical or interchangeable. Buck-Morss warns that Benjamin considered this confluence flawed; rather, nature does change historically, but it would be fallacious to attribute events in history to a natural law (80).

History makes its trace visible on matter. Benjamin walked into the arcades of Paris to find history, the trace of time, and class relations—dialectics in the “visual sentences” formed by the objects in an antique store or a haberdashery. He found material evidence for the origin of Surrealism, as well as an attestation of colonialism and class relations; fashion, architecture, urban planning, visual culture—all open to the inquiring eye of the philosopher from their specific moments of decadence in the 20th century.

— 4 —

Marcelo Cohen conceived his novel *Donde yo no estaba* as a textual experiment fabric that integrated fragments of his experiences and observations from a particular moment of decadence for contemporary Argentina. The year 2001 ended on a rather daunting note for all Argentines: the economy of the country collapsed, there was a run on the bank, and millions of people lost access to their savings, which were also reduced in value by at least a 70%. Cohen witnessed as the social and political turmoil derived from this collapse extended well into the first decade of the new century, noting how that particular historical juncture was marked by a new relation between the fragmentary, the traces of failure, and the political improvisation combined to create an

environment rich in creative reconfigurations of class and economic subjectivities. In his 2006 novel he creates a world complete with different forms of religion, a coherent political system, and its own social turmoil. When questioned about his inspiration for these fantastic circumstances he imagined and build in the text, he answered:

Me di cuenta de que si unía retazos diferentes de mi experiencia y con esos retazos, con diversos detalles, armaba un esbozo de espacio, en ese aglomerado surgían elementos nuevos que eran fruto de ese collage, una propiedad emergente del conjunto, y surgían por la fuerza un poco magnética y un poco procreadora del lenguaje . . . Al mismo tiempo, aunque parezca mentira, lo que yo escribo tiene una relación bastante inmediata con lo vivido. En [*Donde yo no estaba*] es donde más se nota y donde más traté de hacerlo a propósito. Y en general me gusta que dentro de esas atmósferas que parecen irreales, algunos datos muy tangibles, cercanos, provengan de la experiencia inmediata, incluso de la contingencia, llamémosla histórica (www.babasonicos.com).¹¹

Part of the “tangible data” that Cohen takes from the “historical contingency” of Argentine crisis are the emergent improvised forms of class relations across the gaping chasm between dispossession and wealth. Drove of *cartoneros* (cardboard-pickers) rummaged Argentine cities, repurposing the detritus that—once the failure of the neoliberal economic paradigm was revealed—was the only form of “surplus” trickling down onto the newly unemployed masses.

¹¹ I discovered that if I joined different fragments of my experiences, and with those fragments, with different details, assembled a sketch of a space, in that conglomerate emerged new elements that were the result of such collage, this was a generative property of the union, and it appeared thanks to the magnetic and generative force of language . . . At the same time, even if it doesn’t seem to be the case, what I write has a very immediate relation with real life. In [*Where I Wasn’t*] is where this is the most obvious, and where I tried doing it on purpose. And, in general, and I like the fact that inside those environments that seem unreal, some very concrete, familiar data come from our immediate experience, and even from a contingency that we can call historic.

In Cohen's fantastical *Isla Múrmora*, Yónder Nágaro is the personification of the effluence oozed by a properly functioning economic system that has integrated power unbalances and unjust distributions of wealth as a natural condition of the status quo. Yónder, who is made out of the physical and ideological remainders of the fictional historical circumstances in which he functions, is the core of the story. He is a narrative device to explore the notion of the conglomerate of fragments and real experiences that Cohen mentioned as his inspiration. Aliano D'Evanderey, the protagonist, sees in Yónder not only a splinter of his own subjectivity, but also the announcement of a future which is decadent, but not cancelled as in apocalyptic narratives. The future that *Donde yo no estaba* imagines is determined by the centrality of dross represented by Yónder, which enters the main stage of the political to mobilize its actors. In the same interview Cohen explains more about this mixture of futurism and waste:

[E]n general la Ciencia Ficción se ha vuelto muy apocalíptica, una forma más de la culpa y del miedo con que buena parte de la cultura nos paraliza y nos entristece . . . Me pone muy contento que Aliano, el protagonista de mi último libro, descubra que su sociedad es una especie de retaguardia del futuro. Es como la nuestra: tenemos de moderno aquello que los países supuestamente avanzados nos van tirando encima porque ya ellos lo usaron y los cansó o está pasado de moda, y nosotros lo usaremos hasta que envejezca o pase de moda para nosotros. Pero como lo que tenemos de nuevo es regalado, cae sobre nuestra chatarra y también sobre nuestra tradición.¹²

¹² In general terms, Science Fiction has become too apocalyptic, like one more manifestation of the guilt and the fear with which a large part of culture paralyzes and saddens us . . . It makes me happy that Aliano, the protagonist of my last book, discovers that his society is kind of a rear guard of the future. It is like ours: whatever modern things we have is what the supposedly advanced countries dump on us because they already used it and they are tired of it or it is no longer fashionable, and we will use it until it gets older or until we find it no longer fashionable ourselves. But, since whatever new thing we have comes as a gift, it lands over our junk and our tradition.

The junk that Yónder is made of represents the afterlife of the un-dead commodity that still retains part of its use-value, even if it has abandoned the first and principal ring of circulation of capital. A commodity that is old or is out of fashion for the First World (which represents the future for the underdeveloped countries according to a very schematic understanding of Dependency Theory) is exchanged, consumed, and disposed of only to be thrown on top of the Third World's heap of junk and tradition, according to Cohen). But the entrance in this secondary economic dimension is a manner of recycling which not only utilizes the use-value still left in the material object, but also creates a new libidinal economy of affects and intersubjective relations that were not present at all in the first cycle of the life of the commodity. This new libidinal surplus that is always already bastard, secondary, derivative opens the plane of politics to new contingent and improvised strategies of intervention that could not exist in the "original" full-fledged cycle of production, exchange and consumption.

The coexistence of Aliano and Yónder and the consequent disarticulation of the former's subjectivity could not have been possible if the status quo had not been breeched by personal and social crisis. In normal conditions, the consuetudinary relation between a petit-bourgeois like Aliano and a lumpen like Yónder is one of mutual suspicion and distrust; they are determined by the gap between their class attachments to see in the other a menace to their own subsistence. The specific element that frames the rapprochement of the two characters is the scatological dimension of Yónder's body. In normal conditions, smell functions as a sensorial sign of danger, and it triggers a reaction of disgust and repulsion. After the collapse of the economy in 2001, when Argentina abandons the illusion of being part of the First World, the conditions of false normalcy that neoliberalism had established are breeched and in its place, a new contingent economic, social, and libidinal set of circumstances opens. The previously normalized capitalist class relations are altered and improvised organizations of workers (forced by the threat of unemployment) take the control of the

factories, nullifying the role of the owners and administrators, thus radically changing their subjective disposition in relation to the social distribution of power. *Cartoneros*, resisting the “normal” aversion to the manipulation of garbage, turned discarded recyclable materials into un-dead commodities, and derive sustenance from the remainder of use-value that they still contain.

— 5 —

Like *cartoneros*, the Brazilian *catadores* operate outside of the properly defined capitalist boundaries of formal labor. Both groups see their numbers rise and fall to the rhythm of the unemployment tide, which makes this kind of laboring alternatives an index for the health of a capitalist system more reliable than some macro-economic statistics. These groups find use-value in materials that had been deemed useless after their first cycle of consumption, and they (as Cohen explained) take the junk that the more affluent economic strata dumps on them to exploit the residual use-value, which is still enough to secure their most basic subsistence.

The conditions of the lives of the workers of the Latin American garbage dump captured the imagination of Vik Muniz, who approached a group of them in Jardim Gramacho with the intention of changing those very conditions of life. What he achieved with his intervention—the process of creation of *Imagens de Lixo*—was a recycling maneuver at a different level than that which the workers engaged in day in and day out. Muniz does not operate by extracting the residual use-value from garbage and turns them into un-dead commodities; what he does is shrouding the most superficial visual imprint of the image of the worker and of the garbage with a profitable auratic cachet, which divorces the resulting photograph from any trace of the

organic lives of the worker, the garbage, and the landfill. Muniz's pictures flatten out the rich (and usually overwhelming) sensorial texture of the experience of the un-dead commodity. The artist prefers to invoke the myths of Greece (that same Greece that today, more than ever, continues existing only as a myth itself), and replicating the narrative of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, attempts to weave in the images of the *catadores* into the a-historical fabric of mythical time and tradition. And in order to do this, he first severs these images (as portraits of Brazilian informal workers) from their actual historical contextualization.

Anthropologist Kathleen Millar lived and worked in Jardim Gramacho before and after Muniz produced *Imagens de Lixo*. The focus of her research is precisely the opening of new subjective configurations of workers forced into situations of unemployment or underemployment in contemporary capitalism. Her work "addresses the need to rethink the meaning of work in the context of neoliberal capitalism by exploring the formation of new worker subjectivities and practices among catadores" (Millar "Making Trash into Treasure: Struggles for Autonomy on a Brazilian Garbage Dump" 25). What she found after several months spent in the dump is that in the midst of utter dispossession and social vulnerability, some forms of political organization and mobilization are possible, as are forms of quotidian solidarity among the workers. She claims that:

The emergence of flexible production systems, the shift from industrial to finance capitalism, the race "to the bottom" of labor conditions resulting from trade and capital liberalization, and the decline of trade union militancy have prompted many scholars to assume the declining significance of class and class struggle . . . The challenge for today may not be the death of class struggle but rather its transformation into new forms, spaces, and categories of work. By examining the political actions of catadores as well as the implications of some of their practices,

including their creative reuse and recycling of the waste of capitalist consumption, I argue that situations of informal employment constitute new spaces in which class politics are emerging today (26).

In the dump, the *catadores* work without a fixed schedule and more importantly without a boss or a hierarchical structure to submit to, and this lack of regulation translates into a perceived sense of freedom or self-regulation that the workers of the dump mention as one of the most important reasons to choose to work there. The flip side of that freedom, notes Millar, is the lack of a basic floor of safety that also comes with the absence of a managerial class. This double bind makes the Jardim Gramacho alternately and equal parts “pure suffering” and “freedom.” The menace of disease and even death adds a layer of vulnerability to the grueling physical effort involved in carrying burlap bags full of pressed plastics and paper through the mud and the moving trucks.

The horizontality of the intersubjective relations that unravel in the dump makes possible (almost inevitable) a continuity between work and other forms of social interaction, which take place around the ramp, without any interruption of clear delimitation of the realms of the domestic life of the community and the labor. Millar describes this fluidity not only in the personal conversations that go on uninterrupted during the laboring hours, but also congealed in relations of solidarity in both configurations local (the experienced catador takes the novice under their wing until the new learns the trade) and global (the association of workers of Jardim Gramacho exchange strategies with other cooperatives of workers of garbage in Latin America and the world).

Given that catadores work outside of any formal regulatory structures, it may be surprising that catadores are able to share a workplace, incorporate newcomers, and resolve issues of price and competition as smoothly as they do. Nevertheless, the social relations that catadores

create through kinship and affective ties, as well as through the integration of social and economic activities on the dump, foster practices of cooperation (29).

These practices of cooperation have to be necessarily improvised (lacking any inherited stable structure of labor-organizing), and the corollary to that contingency is the fragility of any achievement in the direction of organization and political mobilization. After the first period that Millar worked at the dump, she described the emerging Association of Catadores (ACAMJG) as failing “to conform to the model of trade union, a social movement or a civic organization, but which has engaged in political battles over work, environment, and neighborhood at the local and international level,” claiming that this might be the new direction of labor militancy in neoliberal capitalist economies (29). The workers of the Association began publishing a newsletter called *O Mensageiro da Verdade* whose first number included the following text:

I you carefully analyze what you are about to read, you will see that, I am here to speak about a matter that interests everyone (regardless of whether they are Men or Women, old hands or novices). Registered or not, we are catadores. Therefore I count on the collaboration of everyone in order to unite together in this struggle, more organized. Thank You and Look for the Next Communication (30).

The spirit of the Association is clearly one of cooperation and community consciousness-raising, which worked well for a while, but already in 2009 when Millar went back to Gramacho, she learned about the partial dissolution of the Association due in no small part to the intervention of Vik Muniz. As part of the changes he wanted to effect on the lives of *catadores*, he donated the proceedings from the sale of the photographs to the Association, which then was able to set up a sorting and cleaning center to process the materials of all the Association members, in exchange for agreeing to sell to this center exclusively and to the unique price established by the board of the

association. This step meant that the association went from being an effort to organize the workers to attend to the needs that they had as a class, to being the vertically structured entity that was to regulate the labor of the *catadores* in terms of the logic of the market. The acknowledgement of the vulnerability that they all share and the suffering that is synonymous with the work in the dump, along with the alternative forms of affective and solidarity expressions that can also derive from these dismal conditions were left out of the picture Muniz painted. The new lives that art provided these people with, voided them from their improvised political momentum, in favor of the reintegration of labor to the usual capitalist channels of exchange and consumption.

— 6 —

Violence begets marks of suffering that stand indelible on some fibers of the social tissue, specifically in the world of objects that witness the act of violence. This is what the work of Teresa Margolles has insisted on for the last two decades. First with SEMEFO and later on her own, Margolles has consistently addressed the continued existence of the world of things, which outlives the organic body they accompanied. The rhetoric of the “life of the cadaver” has determined the vast majority of her installations and interventions. And central to this project is the role of *things*, which in this case can be defined as former commodities that abandoned the realm of circulation of capital, and which cannot be salvaged through conventional forms of recycling. The decomposition of the cadaver takes place not only in the sense that it is decaying flesh and bones, but also in the sense of a separation into more elemental forms of life. The life of the cadaver is the remnant of organic life that is smeared onto *things*, thus

extending the reach of a once-conscious form of subjectively organized existence, by disseminating life following a logic very similar to contagion.

Violence is a foundational element of the capitalist order, but it is obscured or sublimated in quotidian forms of social interaction to the point where its symptomatic manifestations can surprise one as if they were the exception and not the norm by another name. Margolles finds one of these symptomatic manifestations in that marginal (but indispensable) institution that is the morgue, and she engages the opacity of violence directly to stretch it and to show it tautly connecting the observer and the subjective disarticulation that it triggers in a human body.

The *things* that Margolles works with—sheets, bodily fluids, gypsum casts, body parts—are completely different from the colorful and (to a point) sterile plastic trinkets that Vik Muniz used for his portraits of the *catadores*, and even different from the technology junk that represents, for Cohen, the relation of dependence of Latin America to more developed economies. Margolles' materials do not function as triggers for political mobilization, and the disarticulation of the subjectivity that they show have more to do with a different conceptualization of organic life, so it has limited political implications. These pieces, nevertheless, mobilize their public in a more direct and sometimes physiological manner. The fact that the exhibited *thing* bears some mark of the organic decay of a human animal suffices to affect people to the core. Works like *Dermis*, *Lienzo* or *Catafalco* directly witnessed the organic reality of the cadaver of a victim of violence, but they are not the kind of *memento mori* that can be shown and considered part of a properly sanctioned mourning ritual. The fact that embalming is so customary for wakes, and cremation is also a very common option to treat the bodies of a deceased family member tells something about the apprehension that the organic dimension of death produces in polite company. The remembrance of a beloved relative or friend is secured by visual representations such as pictures and disembodied memories evoked in elegies.

The difference between the work of a coroner and that of a mortician is the circumstances of death, the former deals exclusively with violent deaths. The strategies that they follow are correspondingly contrasting, while the mortician wants to cover up any sensorially apprehensible signs of organic decay, the coroner penetrates the body, dismembering it in search for clues that help to assign the responsibility for the violence performed on that body.

With the multiplication and dispersion of violence in the recent history of Mexico, the work of Margolles shifted from a reflection on the life of the cadaver as a quasi ontological category, to a socially minded formal expression of the historical circumstances of generalized suffering. The trace of class is deeply significative in Margolles' artistic interventions; if memory and permanent mementos secure the remembrance of the dead bourgeois, only smears of suspicious fluids and offensive smells would succeed in calling attention to the violent anonymity of the bodies at the morgue.

— 7 —

The hellish character of modernity that Benjamin read in its debris was marked by the temporality of eternity in which nothing could stop existing, and everything kept transforming itself endlessly. Commodities went from a thing invested with use- or exchange-value to trash, and back into the circuit of desire via the work of the collector. This way the economic status quo is preserved—the winners of history continued to be undefeated, and the losers, unredeemed. The commodity always wanted to be worshiped in shapes ever-changing at the rhythm of the latest fashion trends. The just-used ticket stub once it has left the capitalist circuit of exchange is trash, but it is also a

memento, a romantic excuse for a new kind of accumulation that is not divested of enchantment.

But if we think about organic detritus wrapped in never-disintegrating plastic bags, in plastic bottles smeared with unrecognizable substances, or in the heaps of toxic waste that are raising the levels of various types of cancer in the communities surrounding landfills, and if we multiply this a thousand-fold, then the trash in these landfills acquires a completely different value. It is one that challenges the normal circuits of libidinal “recycling” of used-ticket-stub-like trash. We discover the sign of high capitalism in the landfill: exploitation of resources, massive consumption and discarding, and utopian abundance and appalling want standing side by side. Trash remains. The hellish notion of the eternal return, of the permanent character of the status quo, only acquires a more noxious character in the case of waste disposal as we know it at the beginning of the twentieth-first century. Mass production and consumption—accepted standards for measuring the health of a particular economy—bring about equally massive waste.

Landfills, as satellite-sites to the world’s economic power centers, offer a productive venue to think about the image of the remainder. There is a dialectical relationship between the object and its witness-owner-observer. The subject establishes a complex sequence of desire and repulsion with the object, which is mediated by the sensory apparatus, and altered by time. To fully connect the landfill to the arcades as loci that are meaningful in similar ways, one has to ask what kind of epistemological tools could be applied to thinking about the landfill. In other words: Can one “arcade” the landfill? That is: Can one philosophize on the top of an odorous mountain of trash? Or, what kind of knowledge can be derived from the exercise of thinking in such a place?

Having started as a common practice in urban waste management in the early 20th century, landfills and massive garbage dumps are the contemporary face of the

remainder of the capitalist mode of consumption. In the 1930s and 1940s, the arcades were already places of decadence, outdated and on their way out from mainstream consumption. At once dream worlds and cemeteries, the arcades housed the remainders of capitalism. The visual compositions in their windows spoke in the language of dust, and from their perfect stillness talked about the transiency of history to the philosopher on watch. In those same decades, a new paradigm of consumption was inaugurated with the advent of a variety of commercial plastics: disposability. By 1970, Fresh Kills, NY, was the largest landfill in the world. In the 2000s, in a much less dream-like language compared to the arcade's, massive landfills tell their stories by reaching their maximum capacity, proving insufficient as a solution to the ever-increasing need for space to dispose of the rotting and odorous remnants of savage capitalism.

In the much-cited fragment that corresponds to Thesis IX of "On the Concept of History," Benjamin offers a powerful image of the relation of history and progress. Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* is at the center of this plate.

His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appearances before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet (Benjamin "On the Concept of History" 392).

This growing pile is what Benjamin reads as not a series of connected events leading to progress, but the debris brought about by the storm that is progress. Reading history in ruinous fragments, the philosopher explored a cemetery of past desires; the arcades were the mausoleum where the material devastation of progress was put on display.

Thesis IX, being a fragment of the last manuscript that Benjamin left outlined, has been frequently quoted in isolation and used by some critics to portray its author as a Romantic philosopher who sees the future only as an enormous heap of debris left in

the wake of progress and which cannot be redeemed except by messianic intervention. The angel of history is a suspended observer that can only witness the wreckage but not stop it; the angel cannot make whole again what has been torn to pieces. His gaze, nonetheless, has a prominent role in the image that Benjamin creates: The stare of the angel-witness reveals the real measure of progress as a mountain of detritus, of outcast broken pieces.

The image of a pile of debris is recurrent in the work of Benjamin, and although in Thesis IX wreckage is mainly an allegorical figure, the philosopher also explored it in the immanent, this-worldly, political realm. It is in the monumental *Arcades Project* that we find the counterbalancing image to the mute powerless witnessing of the angel of history: the materialist dialectician reading the arcades of Paris. The strategy laid down by the philosopher was to look for history in that land of ruins that was the 19th century arcade in 20th century Paris. These commercial passages were an invention from an earlier time, but it was precisely the historical discontinuity that was central to the project. In the arcades, the traffic that was a central trait of the nature of commodities qua commodities was disrupted. The juices of commerce slowed down to a stop in these glass-roofed spaces. No longer commodities, the items for sale were just stranded objects in the haberdasheries of the arcades, which entered into a standstill that was seized by Benjamin as the perfect condition for his political-theological work:

[A] strange rapport and primordial relatedness is revealed in the landscape of an arcade. Organic world and inorganic world, abject poverty and insolent luxury enter into the most contradictory communication; the commodity intermingles and interbreeds as promiscuously as images in the most tangled of dreams. Primordial landscape of consumption (Arcades 827; A°,5).

The “contradictory communication” was the basis of the dialectics of the Arcades. The nineteenth century had been the age of the utopian promises of capitalism:

Industrialization, technology, and mass production of commodities were supposed to guarantee abundance and satisfaction for all. World Fairs and new, urban commercial spaces offered the window space to display this dreamlike brave, new world. Decades later, and nowhere closer to the promised utopia, the twentieth century found the arcades in decay, and the commodities—those heralds of the dream—covered in a thick layer of dust. According to Benjamin, the surrealists were able to see this wild psychic space embodied in the arcades, which the philosopher pointed to as the “mother” of that vanguard, and they tapped into the fascination and disgust of those “promiscuous images in the most tangled dreams.” However, there is no dialectic in the dream itself; Benjamin remembered Marx saying that the bourgeoisie as a class lived in a collective dream, and that it was their inability to wake up from it that kept them from acquiring class self-consciousness. So, Benjamin proposed, there will be dialectics only in the awakening from the dream; and only dialectic thought would explode the “political dynamite” latent in the abandoned dream field of capitalism.

Landfills are, quite literally, growing mountains of debris. In the *Arcades Project*, in Convolute A, there is a mention of the dialectics of relation that takes place in the window displays of the haberdasheries and second-hand stores. Inorganic matter acquires organic behavior there. Having been taken out of the “[t]rade and traffic [which] are the two components of the street,” a commodity slows down its frantic rhythm to a standstill, “proliferates along the margins and enters into fantastic combinations, like the tissue in tumors” (Arcades 42; A3a,7). This image is used to explain the sticky organic nature of the desire aroused by the commodity. The flâneur himself is a commodity in this context, as if the tumorous quality of organic matter in the arcade, these “juices” that complete the organic image of the commodity, reached the human flesh and turn it into yet another host of the tumor.

But, while the organic mostly remains an image in the description of the life in the arcades, a landfill’s organicity is an unavoidable reality. The tumor-like quality of the

juices of desire in the commodities that find their way there, translates into the cancer-causing toxicity of some of the materials that also “enter into fantastic combinations” and reach the host that deals with them, not the *flâneur* this time, but the worker of the landfill: the *catador*, *cartonero*, *pepenador*—the scavenger.

The arcades were places of past dreams. Even when they were turned into trash, the commodities on display could still arouse desire and tempt the *flâneur*, the artist (in the case of the Surrealists), and the philosopher (Benjamin). And while this was partly what made such places as the arcades ideal for materialist historical reflection, the dream world nourished by the arcades/hothouses still functioned according to the logic of commodity fetishism. As a politically aware philosopher, Benjamin thought it necessary to wake up from such dreams. To the phantasmagoria of the circuit of desire in which the commodity functions even after abandoning trade and traffic, he opposed the underbelly of the dream. The nightmarish quality of modernity resided in the temporality of shock, as explicit in Baudelaire’s poetry. The lyric poet was shocked awake from the dream and saw in the city of the nineteenth century the accumulation of shocks that left only wreckage in their wake.

Amongst other topics, the *Arcades Project* dealt with fashion, gambling, urbanism, architecture, prostitution, poetry, and Marxism. Unrelated as they might appear, all these categories painted a constellation, or at least they did so when collected and kept together as parts of a common philosophical task: thinking about history and its relation to the then-current political status quo. Garbage can only be philosophically meaningful when considered as an expression of the whole system that produces it, and not as a stand-alone phenomenon to be “fixed” without altering society and economy in a fundamental way. If the landfill has any chance of being a place for thought, one has, as it were, to withstand the shock of its smelly matter and remain with it to recuperate and articulate whatever knowledge it can bare about our current historical moment.

— 8 —

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic): and the place where one encounter them is language. [Awakening].

—Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*, 462; N2a, 3

Benjamin attempted to think in images. In an important way, the *Arcades Project* is defined by the eye trained to immerse the beholder in a dialectical circuit of desire and self-awareness with the objects that surround him. In the landfill, the act of seeing formal affinities holds a central significance, however, when the beholder enters the landfill, sight is superseded by smell. Matter is at the center of the experience of trash, and a materialist interpretation will be required in the same measure that it was pertinent for Benjamin's endeavors. Just as in the *Arcades Project* where matter was dealt with mediated by its image, in the present analysis too it is the image which is in focus, not matter itself, and this separation between the material object and its image is especially relevant in the case of garbage.

Smell functions as a marker of time. It is the material effluence of decadence. Time in the arcade operates differently from time in the landfill. In both instances, it serves to denounce the mythic time of progress, but then its strategies diverge. In the arcade, "time slows down almost to a halt, to the most basic pulse." This is the time of desire and history acquiring dust. Not much changed in the landscape of these shops, and that in itself was a denunciation of the myth of progress as an unstoppable machine that thrust quickly ahead. Dust is the result of the standing still of materiality. Discarded commodities plus time equals dust.

On the other hand, time in the landfill is frantic, even though the train is not going to a better place. Smell is the most sensorially overwhelming by-product of urban centers. A city like Rio de Janeiro produces 10,000 tons of garbage daily, 60% of which is organic and begins decomposing before it leaves the curb. To frenetic time, add gargantuan volume, and we have the catastrophic picture of contemporary capitalist accumulation. Although the pellicle of dust is an instance of accumulation in itself, it is silent and subtle; subtlety is definitely missing from the intense stench and the overwhelming proportions of the mountains of debris that make up the physiognomy of landfills.

Primitive accumulation is, according to Marxian theory, the precondition that allowed for the advent of capitalism. The amassing of wealth, turning money into capital, was all based on the act of accumulation. Now, in the first decade of the twentieth-first century, accumulation, not of money but of the discarded matter resulting from “normal” capitalist consumption, is revealing the limits of the system. If everyone is a consumer, and it is a sign of macroeconomic health that all sectors of the market are consumers, then it is also a sign of normalcy to produce insurmountable amounts of garbage every single day. Detritus in and of itself is not a problem, but the same logic of accumulation that is considered positive on one end of the system turns into an unsolvable problem on the other. The problem of trash is one of saturation. The scheme of capitalist accumulation does not consider the material limitations of the given set of conditions in which it operates.

The route that garbage travels offers the opportunity to read a different historical account of progress. The steady caravans of trash-collecting trucks that leave a city for their landfill show that the next step of the cycle of capitalist consumption does not amount to wealth and abundance, but to odorous accumulation. Smell shows that what lies ahead is not progress, but thousands of cubic meters of detritus and flammable

gases. The organic nature of things produces smell, not progress. If you wait enough on organic matter, it will stink. In the landfill, organic waste plus time equals smell.

In the landfill, the underbelly of commodity consumption reigns unrivaled. Organic trash enters into “fantastic combinations” that produce a fetid smell, not a dream world. Organic trash cannot be anyone’s dream or wish image; on the contrary, it is treated as the real part of consumption that should be kept at bay, far away from the senses. In bourgeois consumption, an important part of civilization has to stand up straight and separate itself from the world of smell and all the bodily sensations that would place it closer to animality.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud observes that the human animal sealed his destiny apart from the rest of the animals when he stood up and substituted sight for smell as the privileged afferent medium. The institution of the family structure was understood by Freud as a change that marked a milestone in civilization.

This change seems most likely to be connected with the diminution of the olfactory stimuli by means of which the menstrual process produced an effect on the male psyche. Their role was taken over by visual excitations, which, in contrast to the intermittent olfactory stimuli, were able to maintain a permanent effect . . . The diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be a consequence of man's raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him (Freud 46).

On two feet, the sexual excitation depended not on smell, but on sight, which superseded the olfactory function guaranteeing the continuity of sexual stimuli. In this new, upright position humans are capable of seeing further, and as smells are heavier than air, they stay closer to the ground and farther from the civilized man. From this point on, smell faded in importance and its archaic traces were repressed to the point

where people started meeting bodily smells with a sense of repulsion and tried to avoid them by all means possible.

It follows from this that in the later development of communication media other senses were privileged over the olfactory one. Sounds, visual images, and textures can be recorded and coded into a representational apparatus. Smell and taste remain excluded from said representation, being confined to an archaic/auratic realm, attached and dependent on direct experience.

The bourgeoisie holds dear the forgetting of offensive odors: the excrement of births, the stench of death, the smell of fear or of love. A juicy section of the market is devoted to the offering and consumption of products to mask or eliminate unwanted smells. In the suburbs of the United States, that might be possible still, but not in the world's biggest cities, and much less in the landfills. Accumulation has reached such an unmanageable dimension that the physical space destined to hide it away is rapidly running out. The streets of big cities all over the world, in yet another globalized phenomenon, from Napoli to New York City, from Buenos Aires to Barcelona, make the passerby aware of this: The train of savage capitalism is starting to smell.

Waste management in the big cities translates into the cleaning of the streets to maintain the lives of their residents, to keep "business as usual" flowing normally. But the corollary to this tidiness is the silently growing mountain of trash in a small town or economically depressed suburb that is the final depository of the material remains of the "healthy" economy in the urban center. Accumulation is where it all began, and landfills are the last stop for the accumulated surplus value, where it finally reveals its hypertrophic dimensions, the exact measure of its violent extraction of value. Regardless of its geopolitical location, every major city creates its very own "Third World" just by the act of consuming, which for a normally functioning economy comes as naturally, as frequently, and as necessarily, as breathing.

The experience of visiting a landfill for the first time is marked by the overpowering smell of decomposing matter; so it is not usual for the average city dweller to voluntarily venture into such sites. In fact, noxious fumes are the main complaint voiced by members of communities who live in close proximity to waste management facilities. Garbage smell is socially unacceptable. Trashcans are routinely dragged out of the household before the matter inside them starts smelling. But when the amount of waste is measured by the ton, and the period of accumulation, by the decade, smell is not simply a nuisance, it is a shock. Like any other sensorial stimulus that trespasses an established tolerance threshold, the shock of smell forces the body to defend itself, altering its usual behavior.

Shock wears off, to be sure, after enough time has been spent confronting the same overwhelming stimulus. Workers inside landfills, especially in those places where scavenging is allowed, have a different relationship to the smell of waste. Shock is replaced by a differentiated perception of different smells, which guide the worker around the potential dangers enclosed in a specific batch of garbage. Odor travels further than the eye, bearing information about the type of detritus that one is confronting. This is how a sensorial annoyance is turned into an advantage by the body of the worker once the shocking effect has receded. For the people outside the physical realm of the landfill, shock is the only measure for the experience of the smell of garbage.

Fetid matter is abandoned definitively in the landfill. Organic waste, which is responsible for most of the rancidity associated with garbage, decomposes rapidly and it does not go back to circulate into the economy. Most of the inorganic components of the truck loads dumped daily do not rot, but they also remain on the site unless they are utterly transformed into a different configuration, which excludes all traces of foulness. Only then are they allowed to go back into economic circulation. Some materials are

recycled, but they are reincorporated on the condition of full functionality and economic viability, which includes appearing new to the eye and the nose.

The full sensorial experience of the landfill is beyond the interest of the average consumer. Although waste management is in itself a multibillion industry worldwide, the materiality of a landfill does not present the opportunity for a lucrative venture, in the same way that, for instance, shantytowns have often been branded by tourism entrepreneurs as “attractions.” The putrid matter of the landfill would be very hard to sell as a desirable, touristic commodity. Its image, however, present a whole different economically productive case.

Smell is utterly unrepresentable. It surrounds the emanating matter persistently, but it is not mechanically or otherwise reproducible separate from its source, which means that the experience that it produces is physically limited to the proximity to the object of origin. In the case of garbage, this condition can be channeled into a commercial advantage. A photograph of a landfill detaches the visual from the olfactory experience, showcasing the former without alluding to the latter. The re-entrance into the capitalist fold of consumption that the landfill is denied is wide open to its image.

Relying on the eye, as is the case with photography, the landfill offers the possibility of being framed in a shroud of aesthetic value. The formal affinities and the repetition of form are stressed in this medium, but the smell is left out. A differentiation, therefore, should be made explicit; photographic, literary and cinematic representation of landfills provide only a partial representation of such places. To think about and in the company of trash, is radically different when it occurs in the immediate presence of garbage. Then it is the smell and not the sight that first puts the witness in the middle of the matter.

A comprehensive sensorial experience of garbage in the landfill that includes smell is impossible to capture photographically, on film, since the olfactory trace cannot be re-

enacted and circulated along with the visual element. But the images of the landfill that are produced, reproduced, and inserted in culture can be made to establish different levels of relationship to the smell that the visual medium leaves out. In other words, an image can be made to evoke or definitely erase any visual reference to smell since an image relies greatly on an optic component but it is not limited to it. Visual composition is a greatly complex exercise that taps into an equally intricate net of codes and references in the viewer. Seeing is never a “natural” or simple act of pure visual recognition; it is always mediated by history, culture, technology, etc. The physicality of a picture, for instance, is only the material trigger of the actual image that is ultimately fully constructed in and by the viewer.

Every image is dialectical in the sense that it is composed by visible and invisible elements. It tells as much about what the eye can apprehend as it does about what it evokes but does not show. The image of garbage is made up of formal visual elements that will stress or suppress the evocation of the material reality that is necessarily purged from a glossy picture of a landfill. In truth, smell is absent from a photograph, but when the subject of such an image is a huge amount of garbage, the observer understands or remembers that the smell is indissolubly attached to landfills. Smell is not shown, but it can be revealed by photography nevertheless.

Neither a literal translation of visual reality into a two-dimensioned rendition nor a purely archival mnemonic device, photography can go to those places where the human eye cannot, e.g. to the microscopic and the astronomical thus already exceeding the function of mere representation or archive. More broadly stated, photography is able to deliver the image of that which is not immediately visible: Photography is revelatory.

Even though all photography is, at least at a very basic mechanical level, a revelation, some photos seem to be more revelatory than others. The invisible that is “revealed” does not necessarily lie physically in the film awaiting the bath of chemicals

to surface. In some instances, the invisible remains invisible even after the developing, and it only surfaces at the moment when the eye finds the print. What can be found in the image of garbage is “dialectics at a standstill,” the interplay between visible and invisible can function as the hinge between “what-has-been” and the now to form a constellation which is in turn historically revelatory.

Smell and its absence from an image often marks the direction of economic and social fluxes. In our current capitalist system, garbage tends to move in greater quantities out of the most affluent social economic tiers of society and into the most impoverished ones. Free-market economies seem far more efficient in redistributing garbage from top to bottom than they are in producing the “trickle-down” of wealth. Socioeconomic relations, as much as smell, are part of what is dialectically “revealed” in a photographic image.

CHAPTER 2. HUMAN REMAINS

Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre*

— 1 —

Throughout the more than 220 pages of its 1972 edition, *Operación masacre* documents the investigation that Rodolfo Walsh led between December 1956 and April 1957 into the clandestine shooting of a group of civilians believed to be Peronist insurgents by the government of Pedro Aramburu. On the night of June 9, 1956, twelve men were seized by the police without a warrant or evidence. After their illegal arrest, they were led in the dark to an empty lot in José León Suárez, Province of Buenos Aires, to face a makeshift firing squad, from which, perplexingly, seven out of twelve men survived. The news of the real circumstances of the failed, illegal “fusilamiento” did not seep out to the media, and for months not a single word was written about the case other than an official announcement—plagued with errors—about the execution of a group of supposedly dangerous Peronist terrorists. It was only in December of that year that the story about “un fusilado que vive” reached Rodolfo Walsh and jolted him out of his relatively placid life and into a career of militancy that began with the investigation of the shootings in José León Suárez. Written hastily in its first appearance in print, the definitive version of this text took a long time to be sorted out. The legal procedures that ran simultaneously with the investigation provided new evidence that was later included. The reaction of the government to the first magazine installments of the story is integrated into the story’s first publication as a book. And documents that trace the political reverberations of this text spanning more than twenty years are appended and commented upon in the editions that came out after Walsh’s disappearance in 1977. *Operación masacre* did not follow the usual process of literary creation that runs more or less separately from the political processes outside the window of the author. The story

of its main characters—especially that of its author-narrator—is well known beyond the literary realm. But more unusually still, its text morphed over the years, as it was continuously amended, extended, and appended, until it reached its final form, in which the night of the clandestine shootings in José León Suárez is revealed as a germinal moment for Argentina’s most violent chapter of its recent history. And it accomplishes this with a startling economy whose effectiveness rests on the force of the images it creates.

The narration takes the form of a nonfiction novel, whose first version was published in installments from May to July of 1957 in *Mayoría* magazine, after the author walked up and down Buenos Aires in search for a willing publisher, finding fear and lack of interest where he thought he would find an avid reception for a story with “un muerto que habla.” Walsh was convinced that the media would be as astounded as he was to find out about the excesses of a government that did not hesitate to unleash the crudest violence against innocent civilians, acting without any solid proof and with absolute impunity. The uncontroversial evidence of the crime, as we learn in the first pages, was to be found in the physical appearance of Juan Carlos Livraga—the first survivor Walsh interviewed—a “dead man talking” whose body was visibly marked by the violence it experienced. This body is the core of truth on which the force of the book rests. After hearing Livraga’s story, Walsh believes it completely. Nebulous as the details of the case are, arduous as the job of pinning together the story is, the material truth of the tortured body does not allow counter-argument. In this sense, *Operación masacre* is simultaneously a scatologic and a seminal text in which the bodies of those on the edge between life and death disrupt the social tissue around them, catalyzing the creation of Montoneros, an armed leftist militancy—of which Walsh was himself a defining figure—that was at the center of the Argentine political arena for at least twenty years.

The tortured body of innocent civilians mistaken for terrorists not only anticipate the image of the bodies of thousands of actual militants who were disappeared and tortured during the dirty war, but its image in Walsh's book helped to congeal the political will at the core of that militant generation whose force can be measured only by the intensity of the reaction it produced: the parallel physical and economic carnage that the military junta unleashed inside the walls of clandestine detention centers and in the lives of the Argentine working-class who suffered their economic policies of privatization and financial deregulation.

— 2 —

Operación masacre inaugurates a genre that cuts right through the tacit border between literary and journalistic exercises. It is conceived and referred to as a novel, but one that grows as an organic textual tissue, to which a two-decade-long trail of fragments of history—new evidence, further reflection, other voices, different registers—attaches itself as an extra-literary tail. This kind of hybridity could be experienced as an obstacle of sorts by the reader, as one can easily get entangled in the historical references and extra-fictional circumstances to the point where one loses sight of the powerful argument of the book itself. But the extra-literary textual tail is secured onto the initial text by a continuity of a few central images that give coherence to the book as a whole, regardless of the different registers it traverses. For all the anxiety that Walsh expressed at different times about writing, there is a different logic permeating *Operación masacre*, which even though it is produced textually, relies rather on visuality for its full effect.

There is a clear sensorial logic at work in *Operación masacre*; this is evident from the beginning of the narration, and it is displayed more acutely when Walsh describes his encounters with the survivors.

Es matador escuchar a Giunta, porque uno tiene la sensación de estar viendo una película que, desde que se rodó aquella noche, gira y gira dentro de su cabeza, sin poder parar nunca. Están todos los detallitos, las caras, los focos, el campo, los menudos ruidos, el frío y el calor, la escapada entre las latas, y el olor a pólvora y a pánico, y uno piensa que cuando termine va a empezar de nuevo, como es seguro que empieza dentro de su cabeza ese continuo eterno. “Así me fusilaron”. Pero lo que más aflige es la ofensa que el hombre lleva dentro, cómo está lastimado por ese error que cometieron con él (Walsh 22).¹³

Walsh describes himself seeing Miguel Ángel Giunta watching the loop of fragments of sensorial details that congeal the memory of his execution; the mark of the offense and of his suffering is expressed as a never-ending projection whose effects on the body and demeanor of the victim are perceived by the author in equally sensorial (audiovisual) terms. In other words, the force of the testimony of Giunta does not come from the discovery of new objective evidence, nor from the coherence that it had as a plausible story. It comes from the visible marks that the related events left on him, and this is what Walsh notices and describes.

In the absence of a full confession by the perpetrators and planners of the massacre, the proof of the truthfulness of the testimony of those who survived the illegal execution comes ultimately from the visual or otherwise sensorial corroboration

¹³ It is terrible to listen to Giunta, because one has the feeling of being watching a movie that, since it was shot that night, is playing on a loop inside his head, without being able to stop. There are all the little details, the faces, the lights, the terrain, the minute noises, the cold and the heat, the run among the cans, and the smell to gunpowder and to panic; and one thinks that when it ends, it will begin again, as it surely does inside his head that eternal continuum. “This is how they shot me.” But what makes it more distressing is the offense that the man carries inside, how he is wounded by that mistake that they made with him.

of their accounts by the author and his assistant. Fragments of images, fleeting flashes of landscape, and minute topographical details anchor the body of a story pieced together from the memories that a group of shocked civilians kept of a night when they were abducted and subjected to extreme physical and psychological violence. Not surprisingly, some of the most basic facts about the events of the night of June 9, 1956, diverge in the minds of those involved; the survivors cannot remember how many people were detained, or the order in which they got off from the bus that drove them to the place of their execution.

Los vigilantes los arrear hacia el basural como a un rebaño aterrorizado. La camioneta se detiene, alumbrándolos con los faros. Los prisioneros parecen flotar en un lago vivísimo de luz. Rodríguez Moreno baja, pistola en mano.

A partir de ese instante el relato se fragmenta, estalla en doce o trece nódulos de pánico (Walsh 91).¹⁴

Lacking a narrative grasp of the events, the memories of the survivors only retained fragmented images, which nevertheless would be pursued by Walsh and which serve as the nodal points of the story for the reader as well. Part of the sensorial logic alluded to before, could be described more precisely as a rhetoric of myopia, a sort of nearsightedness on the part of the survivors triggered by fright and by the material circumstance in which they found themselves, deprived of visible clues as to their location. After they are shot, for instance, the survivors remain perfectly still on the ground of the garbage dump, most of them face down, for an undisclosed amount of time until morning. At that moment, they noticed only what they were able to see from

¹⁴ The guards drove them into the garbage dump as a terrified flock. The truck stops, illuminating them with the headlights. The prisoners seem to float on a lively lake of light. Rodríguez Moreno comes down, holding a gun.

From that instant forwards the story gets fragmented, it blows out in twelve or thirteen nodules of panic.

their very limited perspectives, discovering small details that were later revisited by the investigating team of Walsh and his assistant.

Don Horacio ignora cuánto tiempo estuvo haciéndose el muerto... Sólo sabe que no se movió del sitio donde había caído hasta que empezó a aclarar...

Alzó la cabeza y vio el campo todo blanco. En el horizonte se divisaba un árbol aislado. Nueve meses más tarde comprobó con sorpresa que no era un solo árbol, sino el ramaje de varios, cortado por la ondulación del terreno, que producía esa ilusión óptica. Incidentalmente, el detalle probó a quien esto escribe —por si alguna duda me quedaba— que don Horacio había estado allí. El único sitio desde donde se observa ese extraño espejismo, es el escenario del fusilamiento (Walsh 104).¹⁵

Guided only by these nearsighted details that were perceptible only from the skewed perspective Horacio di Chiano was forced into, Walsh finds the precise location of the spot where di Chiano lay, patiently waiting among the garbage and the corpses for the right moment to flee. In this manner, Walsh reconstructed the stories of the survivors, bearing witness to the accuracy of the collection of visual minutiae they produced, which in turn served as the most solid affidavit for the truth-value of the accounts of the victims.

Of course, *Operación masacre* is made out of more than only a collection of scattered sensorial snippets. It is Walsh who provides the narrative as an objectively indignant tapestry made out of subjective horrors. The particulars are complex, the context is as layered as the history of twentieth century Argentina, the truth, evident, and the justice,

¹⁵ Don Horacio ignores how much time he spent playing dead . . . He knows only that he didn't move from the spot where he first fell until dawn broke . . .

He rose his head and saw the ground all white. On the horizon an isolated tree was visible. Nine months later he was surprised to find out that it was not a lone tree, but the branches of a group of trees cut off by the undulation of the terrain, which produced that optical illusion. Incidentally, that detailed proved to whom writes this—if I still had any doubt—that Don Horacio had been there. The only spot from which this mirage is perceived the scene of the shootings.

elusive. The narration that Walsh composes is simple, despite all these difficulties. Its journalistic tone matches its intent of exposing the obscenity of unmitigated injustice; and just as he and his politics do not remain neatly hidden behind his lines, he lets the burden of truth be carried by the bluntness of the image.

Caminamos como ocho cuabras por un camino pavimentado, en el atardecer, divisamos esa alta y oscura hilera de eucaliptos que al ejecutor Rodríguez Moreno le pareció “un lugar adecuado al efecto”, o sea al efecto de tronarlos, y nos encontramos frente a un mar de latas y espejismos. No es el menor de esos espejismos la idea de que un lugar así no puede estar tan tranquilo, tan silencioso y olvidado bajo el sol que se va a poner, sin que nadie vigile la historia prisionera en la basura cortado por la falsa marea de metales muertos que brillan reflexivamente... No sé por qué uno ve esas cosas. Pero aquí fue, y el relato de Livraga corre con más fuerza, aquí el camino, allá la zanja y por todas partes el basural y la noche (Walsh 21).¹⁶

The image of the remainder comes to the surface of the narration once again, this time in the form of the appropriate landscape for the execution: a vacant lot covered with garbage and junk. Walsh sarcastically mentions the observation that the chief of the shooting squad, Rodríguez Moreno, made about the selection of the José León Suárez dumpsite as the place for the shooting: he found it “adequate for the effect,” to which Walsh adds “to the effect of busting them, that is.” The adequacy of the place, which could not be explained so much in terms of isolation or remoteness since just a few

¹⁶ We walked like eight blocks on a paved road, at sunset, we saw that tall and dark row of eucalyptus, which seemed to the executor Rodríguez Moreno “a place adequate to the effect,” that is, to the effect of busting them, and we found ourselves in front of a sea of cans and illusions. It wasn’t the minor of those illusions the idea that a place like that could not be so still, so silent and forgotten under the sun that is setting, without anyone to overlook the history imprisoned in the garbage, interrupted by the false tide of dead metals that shine reflexively . . . I don’t know why one sees these things. But it was here, and Livraga’s story runs more forceful, here, the road, there, the ditch, and on all sides, the dump and the night.

hundred feet away there was a working-class neighborhood, seems to refer rather to a sort of continuity among the contents of the vacant lot and the dead bodies of alleged Peronist rebels. The military government of Aramburu pretends to dispose of the lives of its perceived enemies in the same manner the city disposes of tons of used commodities, destining human remains to lie among suburban garbage.

— 3 —

As a piece of writing with one foot in journalism and the other in literature, *Operación masacre* establishes its own particular disciplinary ground on the premise that what is accounted for in it is the truth. And this character of the truth of the story, at the level of the narration, is sustained by what we can call “the force of what is apparent” with which objects, landscape, faces, and scars address the system-perception of the witnesses.

“Hay un fusilado que vive” is the foundational line of the project of *Operación masacre*. When Rodolfo Walsh heard it on December 18, 1956, he was jolted out of a chess game and drawn into the investigation of the events that explained the fate of Juan Carlos Livraga.

No sé qué es lo que consigue atraerme en esa historia difusa, lejana, erizada de improbabilidades. No sé por qué pido hablar con ese hombre, por qué estoy hablando con Juan Carlos Livraga.

Pero después sé. Miro esa cara, el agujero en la mejilla, el agujero más grande en la garganta, la boca quebrada y los ojos opacos donde se ha quedado flotando una sombra de muerte.

Livraga me cuenta su historia increíble; la creo en el acto... (Walsh 19).¹⁷

This is the first of a series of descriptions of sensorial shocks of different intensities that affect different characters but which all come from a confrontation with the phenomenological truth of sensorial stimuli. Juan Carlos Livraga, maybe the most prominent of the characters of this investigation, is also the one with the most undeniable marks of violence inscribed on the surface of his body. The rumor of Livraga's general existence puts in motion Walsh's journalistic project, but it is the direct confrontation with Livraga's tortured body that sets the life of Walsh out its axis, and the shock produced by such an image will recur for months as a symptom that seeks resolution in the form of investigative zeal.

La larga noche del 9 de junio vuelve sobre mí... Ahora, durante casi un año más no pensaré en otra cosa, abandonaré mi casa y mi trabajo, me llamaré Francisco Freyre... llevaré conmigo un revólver, y a cada momento las figuras del drama volverán obsesivamente: Livraga bañado en sangre caminando por el interminable callejón por donde salió de la muerte... (Walsh 19).¹⁸

The force of the image of Livraga's body, which is greater than the persuasive power of the narrative of its subjection to violence, does not affect Walsh exclusively. Livraga is the only survivor whose case made it into the public record after he successfully presented a demand through official channels. In order for the demand to flourish, Livraga is called to testify in front of a number of judicial authorities and made to retell

¹⁷ I don't know what manages to attract me to this diffuse, outlandish story, bristled with improbabilities. I don't know why I ask to speak to that man, I don't know why I'm speaking to Juan Carlos Livraga.

But then I know. I look at that face, at the hole in the cheek, the bigger hole on the throat, the mouth broken and the dull eyes where a shadow of death still floated.

Livraga tells me his incredible story; I believe it in the act . . .

¹⁸ The long night of June 9th comes back over me . . . Now, during almost a year I won't think about anything else, I'll leave my home and my job, I'll call myself Francisco Freyre . . . I'll carry a revolver, and at all times, the figures of the drama will come back obsessively: Livraga drenched in blood walking on the endless alley on which he escaped death . . .

the story of what happened to him and to other eleven men after they were abducted while listening to a boxing match on the radio on the night of June 9, 1956.

Esa es la historia que le oigo repetir ante el juez, una mañana en que soy el primo de Livraga y por eso puedo entrar en el despacho del juez, donde todo respira discreción y escepticismo, donde el relato suena un poco más absurdo, un grado más tropical, y veo que el juez duda, hasta que la voz de Livraga trepa esa ardua colina detrás de la cual sólo queda el llanto, y hace ademán de desnudarse para que le vean el otro balazo. Entonces estamos todos avergonzados, me parece que el juez se conmueve y a mí vuelve a conmoverme la desgracia de mi primo (Walsh 19-20).¹⁹

Livraga's story "sounds a bit more absurd and one degree more tropical" in the judge's chamber; even Walsh, who has already made up his mind about the truthfulness of Livraga's account is less persuaded by it when it is repeated in front of a judicial authority and immersed in an atmosphere of "discretion and skepticism." But Livraga's voice on the brink of tears and his gesture to undress to expose a bullet-wound succeed where his narration failed, replacing doubt with a sense of shame and empathy that Walsh feels once again.

Another example of this mode of persuasion by sensorial stimuli is the description that Walsh offers of Giunta. This man was part of the subgroup of survivors who not only were innocent of the charges of planning to promote a *coup d'état* that night in June, but he was not even a Perón sympathizer. Giunta is innocent by all accounts, and Walsh ventures that to no other survivor will have as easy a time in proving his innocence as a "concrete and almost tangible" quality. "Bastará hablar una hora con él,

¹⁹ That is the story that I hear him repeat in front of a judge one morning when I'm Livraga's cousin and thus I can come into the judge's office, where everything breaths with discretion and skepticism, where the story sounds a little more absurd, one degree more tropical, and I see how the judge doubts, until Livraga's voice climbs that steep hill behind which there's only tears left, and he gestures at disrobing for them to see the other bullet wound. Then we are all ashamed, and it seems to me that the judge is moved and I am moved again by my cousin's disgrace.

oírle recordar, ver la indignación y el evocado espanto que paulatinamente le brotan de adentro, le asoman a los ojos y hasta le erizan el cabello, para deponer toda incredulidad” (Walsh 40).

These visual and haptic images crack open the narration to a kind of affect, which differs from a mode of reception of literature that depends on a tacit contract between producer and reader that calls for the latter’s suspension of disbelief. In the case of Walsh’s text, that suspension is not granted by the fact that this book is branded as literature, but by the descriptions of the sensorially-transmitted outrage that its author felt when confronted with a violent and illegal parcel of the complex political landscape of mid-twentieth century Argentina. The measure of this shame and empathy can be gauged by the well-known militancy into which Walsh threw himself as a result. The trace of this outrage is scripted in a sensorial register in the novel, which is evident in the description of the bodies of Livraga and Giunta bearing the marks of the bullets, indignation, and terror that the night of their execution carved in them.

— 4 —

Before turning into a symbol, or an abstract version of its pure materiality, the tortured body moves something definite in the sensorium of its witness. In a sense, *Operación masacre* can be read as the story of the “turning” of Rodolfo Walsh from a chess-playing, reasonably successful journalist into a militant subject. His professional inclination to follow an interesting story and his personal stance to address blatant injustice prepared him to get involved in the narrative reconstruction of the events that took place in the months and years following the night of June 9, 1956; but it was the affect triggered by

the stimulation of his perception system by the image of the survivors and the place of the execution that translated into his lasting commitment to political mobilization.

In another sense, one could argue that *Operación masacre* is the story of its failure to achieve its original goal: to get the authorities to acknowledge the injustice they perpetrated and offer some retribution. This failure is recognized by Walsh years after the publication of his book, and it is included in subsequent editions.

EPÍLOGO DE LA SEGUNDA EDICIÓN (1964)...

En esto fracasé. Aramburu ascendió a Fernández Suárez; no rehabilitó a sus víctimas. Frondizi tuvo en sus manos un ejemplar dedicado de este libro: ascendió a Aramburu. Creo que después ya no me interesó. En 1957 dije con grandilocuencia: "Este caso está en pie, y seguirá en pie todo el tiempo que sea necesario, meses o años". De esa frase culpable pido retractarme. Este caso ya no está en pie, es apenas un fragmento de historia, este caso está muerto (Walsh 221).²⁰

But this dead case would also prove prolific; in the twelve years following the executions of June 1956, Walsh went through a political radicalization that let him to take on a clearly leftist political stance. Walsh's militant turning, which had begun with the project of *Operación masacre*, continued with a couple of years spent working as a journalist and receiving militant training in revolutionary Cuba, where he co-founded the news agency *Prensa Latina*. He then went back to Argentina where he was involved in worker's organizations and other leftist Peronist militant groups, occupying intelligence and communications posts until 1973, when he decided to make the most militant commitment and became a combatant in the Montoneros organization. The

²⁰ EPILOGUE TO THE SECOND EDITION (1964) . . .

In this I failed. Aramburu promoted Fernández Suárez; he didn't compensate his victims. Frondizi had in his hands a dedicated copy of this book: he promoted Aramburu. After that, I think I was no longer interested. In 1957, I said with grandiloquence: "This case stands, and will continue to stand as long as it's necessary, months, years." Of this guilty phrase I ask to retract myself. This case does not stand any longer, it's just a fragment of history, this case is dead.

importance of the role of Walsh within the Montoneros was not limited to his active participation from 1973 until his death in 1977; his *Operación masacre* was at the very origin of the group. It was the document that revealed the events orchestrated in 1956 by President Aramburu, who would be abducted and executed in what would be the first public operation of the newly formed, armed Peronist organization in 1970.

Perón in *Operación masacre* (and, it might be argued, in Argentine politics in general) functions as a sort of “damned signifier” that names an affect rather than a clear, coherent political position. The content of the politics of the term is not discussed in the text, and the complexities of its many sectorial factions are equally disregarded as being “besides the point” of what the investigation tries to accomplish. Only some of the men illegally shot in the dump in José León Suárez were indeed Peronists; and Walsh himself makes a point of taking distance from these “dreadful beings” that are “los peronistas,” while maintaining that at least to some extent they could be in the right, or rather, that even if they are wrong—if they continued to be attacked with more blatant violence and injustice—they could start being right.

En los últimos meses he debido ponerme por primera vez en contacto con esos temibles seres —los peronistas— que inquietan los titulares de los diarios. Y he llegado a la conclusión (tan trivial que me asombra no verla compartida) de que, por muy equivocados que estén, son seres humanos y debe tratárselos como tales. Sobre todo no debe dárseles motivos para que persistan en el error. Los fusilamientos las torturas y las persecuciones son motivos tan fuertes que en determinado momento pueden convertir el error en verdad (Walsh 193).

It is not easy to discern the affect that shapes Walsh’s opinion of Peronism in this fragment of the introduction to the first edition of the book. His clear position prior to the events of June 1956, against the tyrannical treatment of Perón towards journalists and in favor of Aramburu’s “revolution,” is obviously altered by the time he writes

these lines. A sliver of equivocation cracks his previously solid distaste for Peronism at this point, and from there a more positive regard for and eventual alignment with the cause of the workers starts stirring. But to assume that he simply went through a progressive reckoning of a previous mistake that ended up with his fully embracing the “revealed truth” of Peronism, to the point of dying under such a signifier, would entail the flattening out of Walsh’s own political complexities and a disingenuous neglect of Peronism’s many inconsistencies.

— 5 —

Traces of Walsh’s political transfiguration need not be looked for beyond the pages of *Operación masacre*. An eloquent line can be traced from the image of the victims of the military dictatorship of Aramburu to that of the victims of the military junta that seized power in 1976; a line that extends from *Operación masacre*’s central images of tortured bodies to the tortured militants, economy, and land that are evoked in “Carta abierta de un escritor a la Junta Militar,” which is appended to the editions posterior to 1977. This continuum is an articulation of different images of the remainder that provides a narrative of political mobilization that supersedes the original tale of a punctual “dead case” of unacknowledged state-sponsored violence. Juan Carlos Livraga is a “living dead” who makes the case for the criminal excesses of a government which in 1955 claimed to have liberty as its central motivation; the hatred against Perón finds one of its crudest expressions in the theft of the cadaver of his second wife; the methods of torture that appear with the “Revolución Libertadora” of Aramburu prefigure those used in the infamous clandestine detention centers in the 1970s; finally, the human remains of the disappeared are paired with the economic subjection of the masses to the

“planned misery” of the military junta of Massera and Videla. This line offers a more organic explanation for Walsh’s political radicalization than would a mere rehashing of his changing relationship with Peronism.

The detritus of politics, its putrid by-products, is the image that Walsh follows and stresses in his text as affective milestones that trigger political mobilization. First, the body of Juan Carlos Livraga bears the weight of the argumentative edifice of the horror of the crimes of Aramburu’s revolution. Being the most outspoken of the victims, Livraga provides the details of the persecution that for him only begun in José León Suárez; it was to continue with his re-apprehension and incarceration. After he dragged himself out of the “basural” where he was shot, Livraga was taken to a hospital where the police soon found him and took him to a bare cell where he was neglected to such an extent that the only explanation possible would be that their aim was to wait until he died from his wounds.

Pero Juan Carlos no ha muerto. Sobrevive prodigiosamente a sus heridas infectadas, a sus dolores atroces, al hambre, al frío, en la húmeda mazmorra de Moreno... Cuando acaso por piedad le dejan a la puerta las sobras del rancho, y se arrastra como un animalito hacia ellas, comprueba que no puede comer, que su destrozada dentadura guarda todavía lacerantes posibilidades de dolor dentro de esa masa informe y embotada que es su rostro.

Y así pasan los días. La venda que le pusieron en el hospital se va pudriendo, sola se cae a pedacitos infectos. Juan Carlos Livraga es el Leproso de la Revolución Libertadora (Walsh 119).²¹

²¹ But Juan Carlos hasn’t died. He prodigiously survived his infected wounds, his atrocious pains, the hunger, the cold, in the damp dungeon of Moreno . . . When maybe out of pity they leave a the door the food scraps, and he drags himself as a little animal towards them, he confirms that he cannot eat, that his destroyed teeth still keeps piercing possibilities of pain inside of that amorphous, numbed mass that is his face.

And so the days go by. The bandages that he got at the hospital starts to rot, falling apart in little putrid pieces. Juan Carlos Livraga is the Lepper of the Revolución Libertadora.

Turned into a scatologic emblem, Livraga's body revealed the cost of the "liberty" touted by Aramburu. The religious overtones evoked by the image of "The Leper of the Liberating Revolution" stress the sacrificial character of the victims of an unjust regime, whose corollary is always a political horizon of redemption. The fundamental offense against Livraga and the rest of the executed finds a germane embodiment in the desecrated mortal remains of Eva Perón, which are superstitiously disappeared by the same revolution whose perversity is distilled in the illegal shootings in José León Suárez.

La matanza de junio ejemplifica pero no agota la perversidad de ese régimen... El decreto que prohíbe nombrar a Perón o a la operación clandestina que arrebató el cadáver de su esposa, lo mutila y lo saca del país, son expresiones de un odio del que no escapan ni los objetos inanimados, sábanas y cubiertos de la Fundación incinerados y fundidos porque llevan estampado ese nombre que se concibe como demoníaco. Toda una obra social se destruye, se llega a segar piscinas populares que evocan el "hecho maldito", el humanismo liberal retrocede a fondos medievales: pocas veces se ha visto aquí ese odio, pocas veces se han enfrentado con tanta claridad dos clases sociales (Walsh 177-178).²²

According to Walsh, the name of Perón stirs the animist disposition of the man's many political foes, but their actions betray a hatred of a different sign—that which the oligarch feels for the working class. This idea is later echoed by Julio Troxler in an appended segment of the screenplay for the movie version of *Operación masacre*,

²² The killing of June exemplifies, but doesn't exhaust the perversion of that regimen . . . The decree that prohibits to name Perón of the clandestine operation that kidnaps his wife's cadaver, mutilates it and takes it out of the country; these are expressions of a hatred from which not even inanimate objects escape; the linens and silverware of the Foundation that were incinerated and melted because they bear that name that is considered damned. An entire social work is destroyed, they closed public pools that evoke the "damned deed," liberal humanism recedes to medieval lows: few times has that hatred been seen here, few times have two social classes been confronted so clearly.

insisting on both the phantasmagoric character of Peron's name and on the affect that underlies class conflict.

Mentalmente regresé muchas veces a ese lugar. Quería encontrar la respuesta a esa pregunta: qué significaba ser peronista.

Qué significaba ese odio, por qué nos mataban así. Tardamos mucho en... darnos cuenta que el peronismo es algo más permanente que un gobierno que puede ser derrotado...

El peronismo era una clase... y el odio que ellos nos tenían era el odio de los explotadores por los explotados (Walsh 182).²³

This hatred that befuddles Troxler follows two seemingly divergent paths of political intervention, namely a concrete material display of violence and an attempt to silence any political or ideological formulation that bears the name of Perón. In other words, it makes itself known by the markings it carves in the body of the Peronist militant, on the one hand, and by the viciousness of the attempt to annihilate any trace of it at the level of representation, on the other. It is also in the affective realm that Walsh's text seems to assert its most definitive contribution. The eloquent exposition of the consequences of the hatred the oppressor feels for the oppressed begets a correlational rage against the oppressor, particularly when other venues to sate the claim for justice (the acknowledgement and apology that Walsh allegedly intended with his investigation in the first place) are consistently frustrated. This seed of factional loathing is *Operación masacre's* political heirloom to the militant youth of the 1970s, and the golden nugget that embodies it is the image of the political remainder.

²³ I came back mentally to that place many times. I wanted to found the answer to that question: what does it mean to be a Peronist?

What did that hatred mean, why did they kill us like that. It took us a long time to realize that Peronism is something more permanent than a government that can be defeated . . .

Peronism is a class . . . and the hatred that they felt for us was the hatred the exploiter feels for the exploitee.

Artur Barrio's "Situação T / T, 1"

– 1 –

The night from Sunday April 19th to Monday 20th, 1970 in the city of Belo Horizonte, Artur Barrio completed the first part of his "Situação T / T, 1". The process included the construction of his famous "trouxas ensanguentadas" (bloody bundles), heaps of different kinds of detritus (mainly mud, blood, decomposing meat, and bones), wrapped in large pieces of cloth and tied up with string. César Carneiro, Barrio's collaborator, captured the images in figure 24 and 25 from the process.



Figure 24. Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T, 1 (1ª Parte)*, 04/20/1970. Belo Horizonte (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os* = Records 99, 101).

Besides Carneiro's visual register, Barrio wrote an accompanying text that provided a different kind of sensorial record of the experience, paying attention to his own perceptions as the worked progressed.

SITUAÇÃO T/T, 1.....(1ªPARTE) 1- (DES)
DOBRAMENTO DO CORPO EM FUNÇÃO DO QUE SE VÊ SENDO

FEITO ÁREAMBIENTE 2- PENETRAÇÃO
 DE UMA DAS MÃOS EM (N) + UMA PEQUENA LUVA DE
 BORRACHA AMARELA ESFORÇO PRESSÃO
 DIFICULDADESCIRCULATÓRIAS 8
 8 11- SONS SOM SOM
 3- MANUSEIO DE CARNE EM ESTADO DE DECOMPOSIÇÃO
 INICIO..... 10 CHEIRO
 MEMORIA TEMPO FUMAÇA OLFATO
 4- ABRIL 1970 BARRIO. 10-
 8- LI BERD ADE 5-
 ETC. 7- IDÉIAS
 ELÉTRICAS 8-
 SUORCHEIROSENSAÇÃO ROUPAPEL
 PELSOBREPEL ESFREGANDOROÇANDO
 PELOCOMPELO MATERIAL UTILIZADO NA
 PREPARAÇÃO DAS T.E.: SANGUE, CARNE, OSSOS, BARRO, ESPUMA
 DE BORRACHA, PANO, CABO (CORDAS), FACAS, SACOS, CINZEL,
 ESPUMA DE BORRACHA. ETC. A realização da 1ª parte da Situação
 T/T, I (ou preparação das T.E.) teve lugar na noite de 19 para 20 de abril
 de 1970 em Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (BRASIL) (Barrio de Sousa
 Lopes *Regist(R)Os = Records 96*).²⁴

²⁴ SITUAÇÃO T/T, 1 / (1ST PART) 1- (UN) FOLDING OF THE BODY ACCORDING TO WHAT IS SEEN BEING DONE / AREAENVIRONMENT / 2- PENETRATION OF ONE HAND IN (N) + A SMALL GLOVE OF / RUBBER / YELLOW / STRUGGLE / PRESSURE / CIRCULATORY/ DIFFICULTIES / 8 / 8 / 11- SOUNDS / SOUND / SOUND / 3- MANIPULATION OF DECOMPOSING MEAT / BEGINNING / 10 / SMELL / MEMORY / TIME / SMOKE / SMELL / 4- APRIL / 1970 / BARRIO. 10- / 8- / LI / BER / TY / 5- ETC. / 7- ELECTRIC / IDEAS / 8- SWEATSMELLSSENSATION / CLOTHES PAPER / SKINONSKIN / RUBBINGRAZING / HAIRWITHAIR / MATERIAL USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE B.B.: BLOOD, MEAT, BONES, MUD, PLASTIC FOAM, CLOTH, STRING (CORDS), KNIVES, SACS, CHISEL, PLASTIC FOAM, ETC. The construction of the first part of Situação T/T, 1 (or the preparation of the B.B.) took place in the night between April 19th and 20th, 1970 in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (BRAZIL)

The text offers lumps of information that are not fully developed as phrases. The information provided refers primarily to the effect of the process of the work on the sensorium of the artist. There seems to be a conversation established between the text and Carneiro's images. Take, for instance, the third image from figure 24 and the point number 2 in the text; the circulatory difficulties the artist feels when he introduces his hand in to the latex glove are mentioned in the text and are echoed by the photograph and even by the graphic disposition of the paragraph (if we think of the normal syntax as a flow that is interrupted by an abnormal pressure represented by the prolonged ellipses). The listed points in this text do not mean to describe every detail of the construction of the bloody bundles, but to give an impressionistic account of some moments of the process chosen arbitrarily to capture its sensorial dimension.



Figure 25. Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T,1 (1a Parte)*, with the bloody bundles almost finished, 04/20/1970. Belo Horizonte (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os* = *Records* 100).

After the bundles were finished, the artist took them to a small river that was part of the sewer system of the city and placed them along the stream before the break of dawn. What happened the rest of the day is documented by Carneiro's lens once again. In its second part, the project engaged its public for the first time, and this contingent of passersby that were attracted to the river by the ominous heaps of detritus were a public qualitatively different from every subsequent group of people who encountered this work.

The people in the photographs in figures 26 and 27 had a very different disposition facing Barrio's work than that of the public that saw the pictures and video of the event displayed that same year in the show *Information* in the MoMA in NYC, or that of a person in front of a computer screen today watching digital reproductions online. The experience of each of those three types of spectator has in common only the approximation to the most formal aspects of the piece; but what is left out after the first "exhibition" is irretrievable, namely, the material dimension of the direct encounter of the people with the bloody bundles. Barrio does not even attempt to recover that aspect of the piece, either visually or textually.



Figure 26. People gathered around the bloody bundles while the artist captured their reaction in video and photographs, 04/20/1970. Belo Horizonte. Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T,1 (2a Parte)*, 1970 (Barrio de Sousa Lopes Regist(R)Os = Records 100).

The accompanying text written by Barrio reproduces only concrete information about the events of April 20 in Belo Horizonte.

SITUAÇÃO T/T, 1 (2ª PARTE): Trabalho realizado em Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, em 20 de abril de 1970.

LOCAL: em um rio / esgoto, colocação de 14 T.E. Parque Municipal.

PARTICIPAÇÃO: do público em geral, aproximadamente 5.000 pessoas.

Este trabalho (colocação dos T.E. no local) teve início pela manhã, sendo que as cenas registradas comentam visualmente o que aconteceu a partir das 3 horas (15 hs.), com a afluência / participação popular e mais tarde com a intervenção em princípio da polícia e logo após do corpo de bombeiros. Os Registros foram feitos anonimamente, em meio à (da)

massa popular, é claro (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os = Records 102*).²⁵

The difference between this text and the one attached to the first part of the project is immediately obvious, both graphically and grammatically. This time, the text is formed by coherent complete sentences, using upper and lower case ordinarily. The content is also different as it takes distance from the punctuated expressions of sensorial stimuli provoked by the bundles, and offers a narrative of the events that took place on April 20 instead. What, Where, and Who are the questions addressed. There is something almost journalistic in this enumeration of facts; it is as if the artist wanted to offer only the most schematic frame of reference, which by the invited contrast against the previous example, was to delineate a space reserved for the synesthetic experience of the public encountering the bloody bundles without any institutional mediation. The fact that this space was to remain vacant—since Barrio does not evoke the sensorial stimuli at play as he had done in the first part— does not make it any less powerful as the affective core of the piece. Quite the opposite, that empty place in the structural grid offers its witnesses the imaginary space for latching onto the piece; “What are these people seeing / smelling / thinking / feeling?”

²⁵ SITUATION T/T, 1 (2nd PART) Work done in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, on April 20th, 1970.

LOCATION: on a river / sewer, placing of 14 B.B. Municipal Park.

PARTICIPATION: General Public, approximately 5000 people. This action (the placing of the B.B. on the site) began in the morning; the recorded scenes visually comment on what happened after 3:00 p.m. (15 hrs.), with the people's attendance / participation, and later with the intervention of the police, at first, and the fire department, after. The Registers were taken anonymously, from within the popular mass, clearly.



Figure 27. This phase of the project took several hours to develop, ending with the presence of the police and the firefighters to assess and later remove the bundles, 04/20/1970. Belo Horizonte. Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T,1 (2a Parte)*, 1970 (Barrio de Sousa Lopes Regist(R)Os = Records 100).

The third and final part of “Situação T/T, 1” functions as a coda to highlight central aspects of the piece.



Figure 28. This last part of the project was carried out on a posterior date to the first two, 04/20/1970. Belo Horizonte. Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T,1 (3a Parte)*, 1970 (Barrio de Sousa Lopes Regist(R)Os = Records 109-111).

Again, the artist and his material are the protagonists of the images that preserved the scene. Only this time, the material is not as alarming as putrid meat and blood. The third part of this project evokes a different piece deployed by Barrio months before, which also used toilet paper as the main material; in this iteration, the artist unravelled the rolls and placed them on the shore of the stream and into the water to let them be modified by the wind and the currents. Although not decomposing, toilet paper is also a material highly susceptible to the action of the elements; its physical integrity is never expected to last long.

“SITUAÇÃO T/T, 1 (3ª PARTE) MATERIAL: 60 Rolos de Papel Higiênico. Trabalho Realizado em Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Abril de 1970.”²⁶ Reads the third and last accompanying text of the project. In most of the photographs that captured the last part of this project we can see only the material placed on site, and the text does not supply the reader/observer with much information besides the factual number of paper rolls used and the approximate date when the piece was completed. This phase is not centered either on the sensorial experience of the artist, or on that of the public, but rather on the precariousness of the material used, which makes even the intervention of the artist a perishable component of the work. The closing act of the piece, a definite gesture of precariousness.

– 2 –

There seem to be at least two levels of actuality in Barrio’s “Situação T/T, 1.” First, the concrete moment of the physical encounter of the artist with the materials for the

²⁶ SITUATION T/T, 1 (3rd PART) MATERIAL: 60 Rolls of Toilet Paper. Work Deployed in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, April 1970.

bloody bundles, of the public with the bloody bundles, of the artist with the public, and of the materials with their site of deployment; and second, the level of visual concreteness of the photographs by César Carneiro and of the texts by Artur Barrio. Each of these levels entail their own particular complexity, but the central difference that makes their distinction relevant is their temporal anchorage. The first level is grounded in a specific historical moment, which remains unchanged in any and every iteration of the exhibition of the work. This moment is pinpointed as April 19 and 20 in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

The second level is tied to the spatial and temporal context of these registers as documents, which changes in each instance of exhibition. This disposition makes the images ripe for appropriation by the public, who finds them in a diverse range of material conditions. The way these documents are displayed in books, catalogues and websites differs from one example to the next. Sometimes the images are presented in black and white, and sometimes in color; sometimes there is a handful of them, sometimes there are nearly a dozen; the size of each snapshot relative to the others seems to be the choice of the particular editor of the presentation, not of the artist. The texts appear flanking the images sometimes and not others. There are even some instances in which the third part is excluded.

What Barrio seems to be saying by not sanctioning one original, proper, or at least stable way to present his work is that the real core of the piece is not invested in such a form of permanence. On the contrary, this strategy insists on the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the register compared to the synesthetic wealth of its enactment and witnessing.

TRABALHO : 1970 ARTE

O REGISTRO DE MEUS TRABALHOS ATRAVÉS DE FOTOS, FILMES ETC., É ENCARADO APENAS PELO SENTIDO DE INFORMAÇÃO DIVULGAÇÃO DO MESMO, SENDO QUE NUNCA EM SUA TOTALIDADE. JÁ QUE FOTOS, ETC., NUNCA REGISTRAM TODOS OS ASPECTOS DE UMA PESQUISA, POIS ALGUMAS DESSAS PESQUISAS ESTENDEM-SE POR SEMANAS, MESES ETC.. PORTANTO, RENEGO EM FUNÇÃO DE MEU TRABALHO O ENQUADRAMENTO DA FOTO, ETC., COMO SITUAÇÃO DE OBRA DE ARTE OU SUPORTE EM FUNÇÃO DO MESMO, POIS QUE, INDEPENDENTE DOS RECURSOS DE REGISTRO, O TRABALHO É LEVADO A EFEITO, DESLIGANDO-O OU NÃO DESSE CORDÃO INFORMATIVO A MEU BEL PRAZER.....

..... OU NÃO.....

..... MAIO/JUNHO/1970. - - - A.A. BARRIO.

Figure 29. Facsimile of the text by Artur Barrio. The artist used to produce this kind of document, sometimes reproducing them for public distribution, sometimes including

them in his famous *Cadernos-Livros* (*Notepad-Books*). Belo Horizonte. Artur Barrio, *Trabalho: 1970 Arte, 1970* (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os* = *Records* 109-111).²⁷

If, as Walter Benjamin argued in his artwork essay, the advent of mechanical-reproducing technologies like photography and cinema helped dissolve the auratic distance between a work of art and its observer, Barrio's piece makes such dissolution a central statement of his artistic *modus operandi*. By his own admission, as evidenced in the statement pictured in figure 29, Barrio openly pursues an arbitrary relation between the aesthetic (meaning sensorially bound) act and its register; the fact that the subsequent observers of those images can rearrange them in turn, is but an extension of that detachment between event and record.

The corner stone of the anti-auratic character of Barrio's work is his expressed disdain for the art object. By creating his pieces with non-lasting materials, the artist deflates a possible fetishization of the artistic commodity, since shortly after the enactment of the piece, there would be no artifact to be exchanged. The perishable nature of the materials that made up the bloody bundles, for instance, was at the center of the experience of both the artist and the public that interacted with them; that perishability secured their impermanence and kept them out of the museum circuit. The records help us understand what took place, while stating clearly that what was at stake in the documented experience was so fleeting and precarious that it did not make it through its indexical register.

However, this does not mean necessarily that Barrio renounces completely the art market, or that he is interested in occupying only a marginal space in it. What happened in his case was that the market, after being denied the object to exchange,

²⁷ The record of my works through photos, films, etc., is simply for information/publicising, and they are never recorded in their totality as photos etc., never register all aspects of research, as some of this research can go on for weeks, months, etc. Therefore, within my work, I reject the framing of a photo, etc., a situation of the work of art or medium for it because, independently of the recording resources, the work takes place, disconnecting it or not from that informative cord as I see fit... / OR NOT / May/June/1970

seems to have shifted its attention to Barrio—the artist himself—as the stable signifier to be exchanged. Forty one years later, the significance of the relation of Barrio-the-artist to the Brazilian art market is such that he was selected to be the single artist to represent Brazil in the Venice Biennale in 2011.

– 3 –

In another text called “Da qualidade técnica do registro ou precariedade” (On the technical quality of the record or precariousness,” Barrio recognizes the scission cutting through the relation of experience and register: the technical aspect of the register leaves out the synesthetic experiences of the photographer and the public in a moment conditioned by flux and precariousness.

Em 1o. lugar, toda situação, ao ser registrada, encerra o conteúdo do momento, portanto, o registro não está condicionado a qualidades técnicas, assim como também não apenas ao conteúdo, mas sim também a todo o comportamento psicológico do operador, no caso, fotógrafo etc, diante de um trabalho, momento ou situação que geralmente provoca uma série de situações acontecimentos nunca estáticos, tanto física quanto psicologicamente ... (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os = Records* 235).²⁸

That is not to say that Barrio pretends to erase completely the indexical relation the moment and the photograph sustain, but regarding the idea of “quality” of the register, Barrio proposes that the precariousness at the center of the bloody bundles should “rub-

²⁸ Firstly, every and any situation, in being recorded, encloses the content of a moment; therefore, the record is not conditioned by technical qualities nor by the content only, but also by the psychological behavior of the operator, in the case of the photographer etc., before the work, moment or situation that generally causes the type of situations/events that are never static, physically and psychologically.

off” onto the photographs that were taken of them. He cites precisely his participation in the 1970 MoMA show “Information” with two videos about his “Situação T/T, 1” as an example of a work that chooses a “very rich technical precariousness” over a perfect museographic display.

Esse filme, que foi enviado à exposição Information acompanhado de uma carta em que é explicado em todos os aspectos a quebra de um ritual técnico, no caso cinema, em favor de um trabalho etc, prevalecem não só as imagens a serem registradas, assim como a psicologia do momento. Esses 2 registros —Abril 70— (Situação T/T, 1), não são montados e muito menos têm título, o que resulta na apresentação de um cartaz escrito ou oral em suas apresentações; fica claro então que a situação de precariedade está desligada de qualquer compromisso estético-técnico. Afinal de contas, a precariedade é precária (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os = Records 236*).²⁹

What this precariousness means for the artwork can be explained in terms of impermanence, fragility, and instability of signification. If the synesthetic experience that took place in Belo Horizonte in April 1970 is the emotional core of the piece, then when its record reached its New York viewer at MoMA, it had already been irretrievably lost. The contents of the bloody bundles had finished rotting, they probably had ended up in some sanitary landfill, and the psychological state of the people congregated along that little stream of Belo Horizonte, had undoubtedly continued to change. What was left was a couple of video reels and a collection of photographs. The images in the two videos had an immediate concretion that did not

²⁹ The film sent to the Information exhibition was accompanied by a letter with an explanation of all the aspects of the break with a technical ritual, in this case cinema, in favor of a work etc., with not only the images being recorded dominating but also the psychology of the moment. These two records —April 1970— (Situação T/T, 1), are not edited let alone titled, which leads to the presentation of a written or oral poster at their showings; with it thus being clear that the situation of precariousness is unconnected to any aesthetic technical compromise. At the end of the day, precariousness is precarious.

necessarily refer to their original context; their connection to the emotional core of the piece, therefore, depended on their coincidence with the display of the explanatory poster or oral presentation. Even in that same year of 1970, the MoMa already invited the public to take in a modest monument to impermanence.

If experience and register make the artwork, but their alignment is secured only by a minimum sliver of indexicality, then their connection is conditioned by fragility. As it should be the case with a work of art based on the material experience of the artifact by the public, according to Barrio's statements. This is the case, not only for the MoMA exhibition, but for the in-print and digital afterlife of "Situação T/T, 1". In the absence of a definite version of the work, of an artistic artifact safely preserved by museological zeal, or even a readily available collection of all the images and texts that comprise the fullest record of the piece, the observer of Barrio's work is left with a rich, fragile constellation of fragments that evokes more than it shows. Fragility conditions the understanding of the work of art; the encounter of the images, text, and the attention of the public is pinned together by temporal and spatial coincidences that are fleeting; even the authoritative intervention of the artist—who usually stitches together the piece to a title at the least—is felt mainly by its absence, and serves only to emphasize the precariousness of the whole construction.

This leaves the public without a stable footing facing the display of the records of "Situação T/T, 1," which opens up a more flexible space of interpretation that is not tied to the art history tradition. Rather, Barrio's work's spectator understands its incompleteness to be either a statement about the precariousness of this work of art, or an invitation to make the constellation of fragments more intricate by finding and piecing together new bits of text, snapshots, videos, etc. as they appear in catalogues, books and websites. The borders of this project are fuzzy and seemingly ever-expanding, and just like a sort of Hansel or Grettel, Barrio places new pebble-texts across the years

leading back to the final days of April 1970, as if to the center of a half-disclosed revelation.

– 4 –

The first of those pebbles is produced immediately after the development of Barrio's intervention in Belo Horizonte. Barrio produces a text titled "LAMA / CARNE / ESGOTO" (MUD / MEAT / SEWER), which elaborates his stance regarding the materiality of his work as the guarantor of its connection to reality. Not only to the visible or most obvious part of reality, but "a realidade em sua totalidade, do tudo que é renegado, do tudo que é posto de lado, mais pelo seu caráter contestador; contestação essa que encerra uma realidade radical, pois que essa realidade existe, apesar de dissimulada através de símbolos."³⁰ So, what is this denied, radical reality marked by the triad mud-meat-sewer? The defiant character of the remainder—that which is put aside—points to what radical reality whose existence is enshrouded by symbols? The most obvious concealed radical reality in Brazil of 1970 were the bodies of the disappeared.

Victims of the military regime and the infamous death squads, political militants and homeless people were "disappeared." Their bodies were taken, and their materiality, their image, was never to be seen again by those they left behind. This traumatic erasure is directly tied to the horror of the remainder; whenever a body of a disappeared is located it is usually in an unmarked mass grave, sometimes contained in a bag, dismembered, and utterly unrecognizable. This is the horror covered by

³⁰ What I look for is contact with reality in its totality, everything that is rejected, everything that is set aside because of its contentious character. A contesting which encloses a radical reality, because this reality exists, despite being dissimulated through symbols.

discourse, and its raw material reality cannot be properly addressed in the space of the museum –that place of thickly-layered–symbolism. It was necessary to take this image-meat to the streets, to leave it at the entrance of a sewer, to strip it bare from any artistic pretensions, for it to provoke the collective experience of the missing flesh, rotting, covered in mud. Because evoking the horror of the discovery of the body of the disappeared person sets off a coping mechanism, as some sense of control is achieved through the direct confrontation with the thing that is dreaded. At least that was offered back to the onlookers that found the bloody bundles in that little stream in Belo Horizonte.

Em meus trabalhos, as coisas não são indicadas (representadas), mas sim vividas, e é necessário que se dê um mergulho, que se mergulhe/manipule, e isso é mergulhar em si. O trabalho tem vida própria porque ele é o todos nós. Porque é a nossa realidade do dia-a-dia, e é nesse ponto que abro mão de meu enquadramento como "artista", porque não sou mais, nem especificamente necessito de qualquer outro rótulo ... Portanto, esses trabalhos, no momento em que são colocados em praças, ruas, etc, automaticamente tornam-se independentes, sendo que o autor inicial (EU), nada mais tem a fazer no caso, passando esse compromisso para os futuros manipuladores/ autores do trabalho, isto é:....Os pedestres, etc. ... Belo Horizonte, 20/04/70 (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os = Records 228*).³¹

This informal conversation, this *mergulho* that was shared by strangers in front of the bloody bundles, almost surely, was not concerned with the artistic value of their

³¹ In my work, things are not indicated (represented), but rather lived, and it is necessary to dive into one, to dive into/manipulate it. And that is diving into yourself. The work has its own life because it belongs to all of us, because it is our everyday reality, and it is at this point that I give up my categorization as "artist", because it belongs to all of us, because I no longer am. Nor do I need any other label . . . Therefore, these works, at the moment in which they are placed in squares, streets, etc., automatically become independent, with their initial author (me) having nothing more to do with the matter, handing that compromise onto the future manipulators/ authors of the work; in other words . . . passers-by, etc.

discovery, but invited a darker consideration of a shared knowledge that could not have been brought to be expressed in the public form otherwise. Another sense of aesthetics—a rigorously literal one—, however, was at play here; the thing, the decomposed body, the precarious materiality of an animal life, was “lived” and not “represented.” The tortured, dismembered body of the disappeared was precisely that denied part of the reality that was not supposed to be seen, and it might have been the first or the only thing everyone could see evoked in those little mounds of bodily remains, which thanks to its effect on a sensory level (aesthetic level), acted as the reflecting screen for the collective projection of a forbidden image.

The precariousness of the register suggests what Barrio explains in the text, namely, that the work, after being placed in a public setting, is abandoned by the artist and the real work will continue to develop in the life of the individual psyches who were witness to the material experience of the bundles. The two-dimensional image of the register is the trace of the potent work of the remainder, but an effective one as provocation.

– 5 –

Another intriguing image-pebble came 8 years and 4 months after the experience of “Situação T/T, 1” in the form of a curious text that recovered from memory a parallel experiment that Barrio had developed, and which before its consignment to one of the “cadernos-livros” of the artist, had never been registered in any material form. The name of the experiment was “4 DIAS 4 NOITES” (4 DAYS 4 NIGHTS) which alludes to the length of the journey undertaken by Barrio, in which he did not eat or sleep, and during which he was under the influence of drugs walking around different parts of the

city of Rio de Janeiro, trusting only its under-the-influence memory to keep a record of his findings. Eight years after he decides to write down an account of those days, starting with a specific mention of the bloody bundles project: “A preparação das T.E. teve lugar na noite de 19 para 20 de abril de 1970 e considero esse trabalho um dos mais importantes ate agora dos que foram feitos por mim.”³² The date of the peripatetic project is May 1970, so in a way it works as fourth and final phase of the Situação.

The constant in both exercises is the positioning of the body as the true holder of the artistic experience; the body is the support of the artwork. Barrio’s figure receded into the multitude of onlookers in the second phase of the bloody bundles piece, while his status of creator of the work of art was renounced in favor of the organic development of the artistic situation. In this “fourth phase” his body is the one acting as the receptacle of the sensorial wealth of stimuli encountered under these extreme circumstances, but the supremacy of the will of the artist over the form of his work is still carefully avoided, as is the precariousness of the materiality of the piece. Barrio sets out to research the capacity of his own flesh to keep the record of the city, pushing the limits of what his usual urban experience entailed.

[O] desgaste físico . . . me abriu uma percepção fantástica pois com todo esse caminhar a percepção se aguçou incrivelmente. O corpo ai ja estava mais condicionado a mente, trabalhando mesmo, o corpo era quase uma máquina . . . (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Artur Barrio: A Metáfora Dos Fluxos* 2000/1968 79-80).³³

The body is a recording machine in which the city inscribes its mark; an organic machine, imperfect, and precarious in which the experience, no doubt, will

³² The preparation for the T.E. took place on the night on the night of the 19th to the 20th of April, 1970, and I consider this work one of the most important up to now done by me.

³³ Physically worn, opening myself to an extraordinary perception, because along this walk, perception was highly stimulated. The body then was more conditioned to the mind, really working, the body was almost a machine.

continuously be transformed by a fallible memory and uncontrollable associations. It is impossible to calculate the extent to which the veracity of the event is fractured under subsequent layers of reformulation of the original material input that the senses received. But even all those years later, an image of the remainder is especially prominent, further tying this project to the one in Belo Horizonte.

Nesse trabalho processo tive uma passagem pelo esgoto aliás, pela sua boca ja que achei que não deveria me interromper diante de um obstáculo como um esgoto; uma das coisas que logo reparei pois ja era dia foi que em torno do mesmo e no leito do próprio a erva crescia viçosa e verdejante, da morte surgia a vida no processo incrível das transformações orgânicas, assim saquei a morte no sentido da vida ou seja que as duas formavam um todo neste pequeno planeta dito azul . . . portanto o esgoto estava lá e tendo consciencia da estrutura por nós denominada de vida, atravessei-o e saí do outro lado. Agora, não reparei se estava fedendo ou não, eu estava pouco ligando, aliás desde o momento que os intestines tem merda . . . e continuei minha caminhada (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Artur Barrio: A Metáfora Dos Fluxos 2000/1968 80-81*).³⁴

Death begetting life, such is the memory of Barrio's stop at the sewer. Just a few weeks before, he was placing bundles of rotting meat, feces, urine, and bones in the mouth of another sewer; Barrio abandoned those remains in Belo Horizonte, to find something else in its place in Rio de Janeiro: bright green grass as a promise of life overcoming its

³⁴ In this progress work I happened to pass by the sewer . . . as a matter of fact through its entrance . . . because I found I should not interrupt my walk before an obstacle as the sewer; one of the things I soon noticed, because there was already day light, was that around the sewer and on its bed grew lush green grass, from death emerged life in the incredible process of organic transformations, so I understood death in the sense of life or that both made up a whole in this so called small blue planet . . . so the sewer was there and being conscious of the structure denominated life by us, I crossed it and came out on the other side. Now, I didn't notice if I was stinking or not, I couldn't care less, as a matter of fact since the intestines have shit . . . I continued my walk.

detritus. Connecting these two experiences via the image of the remainder, one can speculate that the abandoned bundles acted as seeds of sorts, which germinated under Barrio's observation. He traverses the sewer, walks down its tunnel accepting his place in relation to the excrement running through it; the human body hides excrement as well, making the artist's body-machine understand his surrounding circumstances as an extension of his own body, to the point where he does not remember being repelled by the fetid smell of the sewer. And after that, he continues walking the streets of Rio de Janeiro, subjecting his body to such a stress that Barrio needed to enter a psychiatric facility for a short period of time after this project. In 1978 he writes all this in a notebook, stating that he is preparing a 600-page account of all the details he remembers from those four days and nights; this project has not been completed (or maybe even continued at all after that mention), but that non-existent book is the ultimate destabilizing element of this work-contellation: the work of art profoundly invested in the most concrete physical exercise, which nevertheless leaves nothing behind but a promise to exist. Such is the last, phantasmagoric pebble-text pointing at once to the future (of the promise) and the past (of the experience), thus opening definitely the limits of "Situação T/T, 1".

The dispersed fragments that make up the work, register, and posterior elaborations of "Situação T/T, 1" establishes an interplay between visible elements and evoked invisible ones, bringing forth a sensorial notion of precariousness in which the image of the remainder acts as the hinge between what is shown and the larger synesthetic experience that is conjured up.

Rubem Fonseca's "A arte de andar nas ruas de Rio de Janeiro"

– 1 –

Joining the ranks of protagonists with a literary inclination who populate Rubem Fonseca's novels, in comes the central character of this story. Augusto—the promenader, whose real name is Epifânio—is recently retired after winning the lottery and wants to embark on a project to write a book about the city of Rio de Janeiro. He chooses to begin his research in the gritty downtown Rio neighborhood that had been the theater of his childhood and to which he returns after his retirement. The title of the planned book, "A arte de andar nas ruas de Rio de Janeiro," draws a line dividing mundane, minor forms of absent-mindedly walking from a properly artful way of walking. Augusto embraces the second one, turning his pacing down the streets of the city into a creative exercise. He walks and thinks during the day and part of the night, until his alarm clock reminds him it is 3 a.m., when he heads back home to write. He walks and writes with the same purpose, to elucidate, and such lucidity is his first step into an amorous embrace of the city.

Literature, as the sanctioned altar to inspiration overlooked by muses, does not interest Augusto. Literature as an oppressive exercise in "pobreza, embriaguez, loucura, escárnio dos tolos, agressão dos invejosos, incompreensão dos amigos, solidão, fracasso"³⁵ represents an ideal of self-sacrifice known but never fully embodied by the protagonist (Fonseca 11-12). When João, Augusto's poet friend who did serve literature in this way, died, leaving behind an unfinished 600-page novel as the only inheritance to his family, his widow (who did not share his passionate regard for literature) unceremoniously destined the fruit of João's zeal to the garbage bin, along with other

³⁵ poverty, drunkenness, folly, scorn from idiots, aggression from the envious, misunderstanding from friends, solitude, failure.

old papers (Fonseca 12). This image stitches together writing and the remainder, which in this story run along parallel lines; the pages that come out of the artful exercise of walking and writing will stay as close to the filth on the ground as do the soles of the promenader's shoes.

Como anda a pé, vê coisas diferentes... Ele pretende evitar que seu livro seja uma espécie de guia de turismo para viajantes em busca do exótico, do prazer, do místico, do horror, do crime e da miséria, como é do interesse de muitos cidadãos de recursos, estrangeiros principalmente ... Augusto quer encontrar uma arte e uma filosofia peripatéticas que o ajudem a estabelecer uma melhor comunhão com a cidade. Solvitur ambulando (Fonseca 18-19).³⁶

Rio de Janeiro is a riddle better approached by foot; it is a multi-faceted problem that requires a solution, even if it is never an all-encompassing one, but a fragmentary one. And its most assiduous walker takes to the streets to find an ambulatory art and philosophy that will allow him to commune with it while trying to solve a few pieces of the puzzle. Walking and literature are but one branch that the promenader extends onto the city while looking to bond with it. Beyond his purely literary efforts, language and its mastery in a more general form also hold a power that Augusto wants to share, in communion, with his neighbors.

Além de andar ele ensina as prostitutas a ler e a falar de maneira correta... É um problema que tem que ser resolvido. Ele tem consciência de que

³⁶ Since he walks, he sees other things . . . He wants to avoid making his book into a kind of tourist guide for travelers looking for something exotic, for pleasure, for something mystical, for horror, for crime and misery, as it is of interest of many wealthy citizens, mainly foreigners . . . Augusto wants to find a peripatetic art and philosophy to help him establishing a better communion with the city. Solvitur ambulando.

ensinar prostitutas a ler e a falar corretamente... pode ser, para elas, uma forma de tortura (Fonseca 19).³⁷

Augusto is well aware of the resistance that his efforts to bond through the pedagogy of language will encounter. The prostitutes suffer through his infallible method to learn to read and write, which completely breaks the normal scheme of payment and retribution that they are accustomed to enter into with clients. For some women, the uncommon contract that Augusto wants to establish with them gets to be too much; one even attacked the protagonist in a rage, biting off one of his ears. But far from being a real deterrent, this resistance is simply part of the disposition of the intersubjective economy in which the promenader wishes to intervene.

Language and the streets are never far apart in “A arte...,” and the protagonist finds different ways to make this connection a significant one in his relationship to his neighbors. With the prostitutes, he always uses a fresh newspaper as his sole “textbook,” making a point of using only examples that cover current events and can serve as a bridge between himself and the women. Graffiti as an urban informal expression of language is also an opportunity to “solve the problem” of the inadequate mastery of language. When Augusto notices misspelled words on a wall recently sprayed by a group of young men, he calls them up so they can acknowledge their blunders.

Dois jovens escrevem com spray nas paredes do teatro, que acabou de ser pintado e exhibe poucas obras de grafiteiro, NÓS OS SÁDICOS DO CACHAMBI TIRAMOS O CABASSO DO MUNICIPAL GRAFITEROS UNIDOS JAMAIS SERÃO VENSIDOS... “Hei”, diz Augusto para um dos jovens, “cabaço é com cê-cedilha, vencidos não é com S, e falta um i no

³⁷ Besides walking, he teaches prostitutes to read and to speak correctly . . . It’s a problem that must be solved. He is aware that teaching prostitutes to read and speak correctly . . . can be, for them, a form of torture.

grafiteiros.” O joven responde, “Tio, você entendeu o que a gente quer dizer, não entendeu?, então foda-se com suas regrinhas de merda” (Fonseca 19).³⁸

Once again Augusto is met by an aggressive display of suspicion and distrust. But Augusto accepts his role without reservations, and the self-sacrificing disposition he disavowed in his relation to literature he embraces fully when it comes to his communion with his neighbors. It is not that he wants to get closer to the people around him; rather, it seems that his wish is to partake in the urban machine, and by altering some of its parts make it move differently.

– 2 –

The plan of writing “A arte...” long predates Augusto’s retirement; but he decided to wait until he left his bureaucratic position at the sewage department to be able to concentrate to the extent that his particular project required. During his years at the sewage department, “Augusto voltava para sua casa e não conseguia se livrar dos problemas da companhia de águas e esgotos; uma cidade grande gasta muita água e produz muito excremento” **(11)**. This image of the economy of the city as a bodily flux illuminates the connection of the urban machine to its environment by stressing the contrast between the intake and the outcome. The image also makes clear that the best vantage point to observe this exchange is from the galleries of the sewer, that city in reverse that sustains and alleviates its visible counterpart.

³⁸ Two young men write with spray painting on the walls of the theater, that had been recently painted and that houses few works by the graffiti artist. WE THE SADISTS FROM CACHAMBI SKREWED THE MUNICIPAL. GRAFFITIERS UNITED WILL NEBER BE DEFEETED . . . “Hey,” said Augusto to one of the young men, “Screwed is spelled with a C, Never with a V and Defeated with EA.” The young man responds, “Look man, you understood what we meant, right? So, lay off with your shitty rules.”

What Augusto understood about the economy of consumption and effluence was problematic enough to overwhelm his need for writing, so he decides to buy lottery tickets; and when his number is called out, he quits his job at the Sewage Department. The experience of the underground, however, persists in the sensibility of the protagonist, and those years he had spent in the sewers of the city seem to pour over his work as a writer. His sensorial apparatus is trained by the disposition of the tunnels running underneath the city's pavement, away from light and in close proximity to pungent human detritus. Smell and effluvia, the refuse of the bodily life of the urban machine, are important elements of his investigation of the downtown area. During his regular strolls on downtown streets, he perceives that in the center of the city the liminal separation between the world underground and the life on the surface seems more porous.

The preoccupations of an evangelical minister named Raimundo, who comes in contact with Augusto only briefly and sporadically, presents a good example of this porosity. Raimundo had begun his service at one of the many decaying film theaters in the downtown only a short while before seeing Augusto among his congregants (although not taking part in the ritual). The minister noticed the strange picture of a man that the protagonist presents, wearing dark shades inside the building and missing one ear; and immediately he feels menaced by this odd figure, and his life is affected by an unnamed angst whose effects are felt in his body as well. "Depois que o homem apareceu, Raimundo passou sofrer de insônia, a ter dores de cabeça e a emitir gases intestinais de odor mefítico que queimam seu cu ao serem expelidos" (15).³⁹ Augusto's image is the alien fragment that, lodging itself into the quotidian function of the well-oiled machine of proselytism and exploitation of the church, makes it tumble. Raimundo notices a change in his congregation after the short, uninvolved visits of the

³⁹ After that man appeared, Raimundo started suffering from insomnia, having headaches and emitting intestinal gases with a putrid smell that hurt when they were expelled.

one-eared man who sits at the back of the theater-church. The alms, the fuel that will make the machine thrive, have stopped coming in, thus endangering the position of the minister in the system. The bodily ailments that Raimundo endures connect directly to other foundational images of his constitution as a subject:

O pastor Raimundo migrou do Ceará para O Rio de Janeiro quando tinha sete anos, junto com a família que fugia da seca e da fome... É um bom pastor como foi um bom camelô e um bom filho, pois tomou conta da sua mãe quando ela ficou parálitica e fazia cocô na cama, até o dia da sua morte. Ele não consegue esquecer o corpo senil, decadente e moribundo de sua mãe, principalmente as partes genitais e excretoras, que era obrigado a limpar todos o dias (Fonseca 14).⁴⁰

The Northeast of Brazil, as a wasteland that makes the survival of human life impossible, connects to the misery of the body of the mother as the two axes that define the subjective position of the minister. Draught, famine, and bodily effluvia short-circuit the distinction between the generative and the excretory functions of the motherland that has fallen into a paralysis. For Raimundo, the grit of life on the streets of central Rio reverberates with images of the remainder that make up the sediment at his core, compromising his ability to function properly, to be a good clergyman, as he was a good drug-dealer and a good son. Augusto, in this context, serves as the catalyst that sets Raimundo's unrest in motion. The stroller seems to bring in with him the fractured, indifferent character of the neighborhood, in front of which the idea of an all-powerful god, one who would guarantee order and harmony among the elements of his creation, can only be seen as at best a charade, and at worst a cruel monstrosity.

⁴⁰ Pastor Raimundo migrated from Ceará to Rio de Janeiro when he was seven years old, along with his family who fled the drought and the hunger. He was a good pastor, just as he had been a good drug dealer and a good son, since he took care of his mother when she fell sick and soiled herself on her bed, until the day she died. He cannot get rid of the memory of the senile body, decaying and dying of his mother, mainly the genitals and excretory parts that he had to clean every day.

Augusto feels mystic reverence only for the trees of the ancient parks of the area. They appear as a connection between the underground of the city and its surface, between the ancient past and the present. And for that Augusto loves them completely, quietly adoring them as he clandestinely spends the night inside the park just to be able to do what he is too ashamed to do in the light of day.

Na escuridão as árvores são ainda mais perturbadoras do que na claridade e deixam que Augusto, ao caminhar lentamente sob suas sombras noturnas, comungue com elas como se fosse um morcego. Abraça e beija as árvores... Entre as árvores Augusto não sente irritação, nem fome, nem dor de cabeça. Imóveis, enfiadas na terra, vivendo em silêncio, indulgentes com o vento e os passarinhos, indiferentes aos próprios inimigos, ali estão elas, as árvores, em volta de Augusto, e enchem sua cabeça de um gás perfumado e invisível que ele sente, e que transmite tal leveza ao seu corpo que se ele tivesse a pretensão, e a vontade arrogante, poderia até mesmo tentar voar (Fonseca 27-28).⁴¹

Augusto-as-bat communes with the benevolent trees that reverse the economy of the rest of the city: While the urban machine takes sustenance from the environment only to give its excrescence in return, the trees are indifferent to their enemies, stoically living under and above the ground, and giving sustenance to the creatures around them. The air that is the product of this benign economy stimulates the protagonist as no human connection seems to. Trees illustrate the ideal of communing non-subjects that Augusto

⁴¹ In the dark, the trees are even more disturbing than in the light and they let Augusto, as he walks slowly underneath their nocturnal shade, be close to them as if he were a bat. He embraces and kisses the trees . . . Among the trees, Augusto doesn't feel irritation, hunger, or headaches. Immobile, stuck to the ground, living in silence, indulgent with the wind and the little birds, indifferent to their enemies, there they stand, the trees, around Augusto, filling his head with a perfumed, invisible gas that he feels, which transmits such lightness to his body that if he had the pretense, and an arrogant will he would even attempt to fly.

aims for. Completely hollowed of any sense of self, they integrate time and place and provide sustenance for other creatures with their mere presence.

– 3 –

“Augusto, the promenader” begins Fonseca’s text. The double-named, sewer-working, literarily-inclined protagonist thinks best when he is walking. He deliberates more effectively while covering the cobble-stoned streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro, and his literary ambitions are directly connected to this exercise. The book that he sets out to write seeks to illuminate the face of the city that he encounters during his daily forays. In other words, he wants to map out the city from the point of view of the promenader who can only see what is in his immediate vicinity. What all the versions of the book that he discards have in common is an all-encompassing point of view that can only be achieved with the aid of a non-organic vehicle. This fictional account of the city as a plane in which all neighborhoods and their inhabitants form a continuum that can be flattened and made the equivalent when explained in terms of history, architecture, or touristic value repels Augusto. His book in turn will be, by necessity, a collection of seemingly disconnected fragments, which shows the fallacy of the unifying shape usually provided by a map.

... Augusto olha com atenção tudo o que pode ser visto, fachadas,
telhados, portas, janelas, cartazes pregados nas paredes, letreiros
comerciais luminosos ou não, buracos nas calçadas, latas de lixo, bueiros,

o chão que pisa, passarinhos bebendo água nas poças, veículos e principalmente pessoas (Fonseca 12).⁴²

The perspective that this alternative city guide assumes is in line with Augusto's goal of communing with the city; that is, of establishing an organic relation to the people and objects of each neighborhood. It relies on what could be called a "horizontal mapping" of the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The different types of city guides that Augusto very consciously discards offer a drawing of the city dictated by an all-encompassing principle—whether it is architecture, history, entertainment, or health consciousness—which is external to the experience of the organic life of the streets and is imposed from above, thus yielding a "vertical" rendering of the city.

A horizontal vantage point means to renounce any sense of exhaustive comprehension of the complete edifice of the urban machine. The eye of the promenader will guide his readers through a meander of fragmentary images and scenes that provide his map more texture than extension. This view from the city is clearly at odds with the narcissist, self-assigned title of Rio de Janeiro as the "marvelous city," due not only to its resistance to paint a gloss of alluring comprehensibility over it, but also because the fantasy of the marvelousness can only be conjured while watching from a distance, from atop its many *morros*.

O Rio é uma cidade muito grande, guardada por morros, de cima dos quais pode-se abarcá-la, por partes, com o olhar, mas o centro é mais diversificado e obscuro e antigo, o centro não tem um morro verdadeiro; como ocorre com o centro das coisas em geral, que ou é plano ou é raso, o centro da cidade tem apenas uma pequena colina... e para se ver o centro da cima, e assim mesmo mal e parcialmente, é preciso ir ao morro de

⁴² Augusto sees attentively everything that there is to be seen, façades, roofs, doors, windows, posters on the walls, billboards, wholes on the sidewalks, garbage cans, manholes, the ground he walks on, little birds drinking from the puddles, vehicles and, mainly, people.

Santa Teresa, mas esse morro não fica em cima da cidade, fica meio de lado, e dele não dá para se ter a menor idéia de como é o centro, não se vêem as calçadas das ruas, quando muito vê-se em certos dias o ar poluído posado sobre a cidade (Fonseca 15-16).⁴³

The center of the city, besides its porosity that makes the separation between under and above ground difficult to sustain, possesses a flatness that makes it impossible to contemplate its image all at once. The rest of the city, in contrast, lends itself to be consumed as a phantasmagorical evocation of wholeness, of order, and enchantment. The *morros* that abruptly interrupt the bi-dimensionality of the city are paramount to the narcissistic formulation of the character of the city. Just like in the myth of Narcissus, the eye, which peers down from any overlook into the city that extends like the river that its name evokes, beholds a spellbinding illusion of beauty, which is ultimately devoid of subjective content. In the myth, after an initial moment of confusion, Narcissus was able to understand that the image on the surface of the pond was not another boy, but himself; but the power of the vision persisted, and what he *saw* overrode what he *knew*. The center of the city, with its un-embraceability by the eye, resists the narcissistic fascination by a phantasmagoric image. And this makes it the perfect point to begin the peripatetic experiment of Augusto.

“O resto da cidade, o imenso resto, que somente o satanás da Igreja de Jesus Salvador das Almas conhece inteiramente, será percorrido no momento oportuno” (16). But, of course, the story only covers the forays of the promenader in the only-

⁴³ Rio is a very large city, surrounded by hills, atop of which one can cover it all, broken down, with the eye, but the center is more diverse and dark and ancient, the center doesn't have a real hill; as it happens with the center of all things in general, that is flat or even, the center of the city has only a small mound . . . and to be able to see its center from above, and even then badly and partially, it's necessary to go to Santa Teresa's hill, but that hill is above the city, sideways, and from it one cannot gather a clear idea of how the center looks, one can't see the sidewalks, at best, someday one can see the polluted air hovering above the city.

fragmentarily approachable space that is the center, where the city smells and the hunger, the poverty, and the anger are echoed by the wail of the tide.

Solvitur ambulando... Espera o dia raiar, em pé na beira do cais. As águas do mar fedem. A maré sobe e baixa de encontro ao paredão do cais, causando um som que parece um suspiro, um gemido. É domingo, o dia surge cinzento; aos domingos a maioria dos restaurantes do centro não abre; como todo domingo, será um dia ruim para os miseráveis que vivem dos restos de comida jogados fora (Fonseca 50).⁴⁴

– 4 –

The relation that Augusto fosters with his neighbors is marked by a perceived imbalance for he is not like any of them; in fact, besides his role as writer, he gives little indication of the class or general type to which he belongs. This difference is made more evident by the highly organized and clearly defined nature of some of the groups with whom he comes in contact, specifically prostitutes and beggars.

He befriends Kelly, the twenty-eighth prostitute he has taught to read and write. The alteration of the proverbial contract that Augusto presents the women with tends to catch them off guard, and that is also the case with Kelly, who struggles to understand the nature of their relationship and acts as a lover rather than a pupil. She moves in with Augusto for the two weeks that it will take her to learn to read and write, and during that time shares with the promenader her own perspective on the city, people,

⁴⁴ Solvitur ambulando . . . He waits for dawn standing on the edge of the piers. The seawater stinks. The tide goes up and down against the wall of the pier, producing a sound like a sigh, a moan. It's Sunday, the day appears ashen; on Sundays the majority of the restaurants of the center do not open; it'll be a bad day for the misérables that live off of discarded scraps of food.

and her occupation. When she mentions in passing that she has a procurer from whom she wants to separate, Augusto helps her and gets to know more about the lives of the women he has taught.

“Pensei que vocês estavam organizadas e não havia mais cafetão”, diz Augusto.

“Minha amiga Cleuza me chamou para a... Associação das Prostitutas. Mas aí eu descobri que tem três associações de prostitutas e eu não sei para qual delas entrar. Meu amigo Boca Murcha me disse que organizar marginal é a coisa mais complicada do mundo” (Fonseca 30).⁴⁵

Organization and dissolution, once again, are present in the interaction of the promenader with the city and its inhabitants. The prostitutes are organized in associations that would substitute abusive procurers, but the indeterminacy of their specific program (which should set them apart from each other) makes the prospect of joining one of them daunting. Kelly’s account of the exchanges with her friends and colleagues evidences her consciousness of being a part of the hard-to-organize marginal class; but that nevertheless provides a symbolic organization and a sort of class-consciousness. The sense of a community with shared needs and problems precedes the difficulty of engaging in their solution as a group.

The group that Augusto approaches that has the most developed consciousness of class is a highly organized group of beggars. First, Augusto befriends a homeless, scavenging man, Benevides, and his family. They sleep on the front steps of a bank and live by collecting and selling cardboard. Benevides is mainly interested in the survival of his family, and he and his family keep apart from other homeless groups who compete for control over different areas of the center of the city. They insist on

⁴⁵ “I thought that you were organized and there weren’t any pimps anymore,” Augusto said.

“My friend Cleuza invited me to the . . . Prostitutes Association. But I discovered that there are three associations of prostitutes and I don’t know which one to pick. My friend Wilted Mouth told me that organizing marginals is the most complicated thing in the world.

differentiating themselves from beggars who live off the charity of passersby. For Benevides, the notion of collective living in a bigger group of people who broadly share his material circumstances does exist; but Benevides resists the pull of collective organization. For him and his family, the *petit bourgeois* mentality survives in this most precarious of conditions. He tells Augusto, however, of the existence of an organization for the homeless that has control over the city center, and that its leader likes to be called the King of the Beggars.

“Outro dia veio aqui um sujeito dizendo que estava organizando os mendigos, numa associação chamada Mendigos Unidos. Mande ele tomar dentro. Nós não somos mendigos... O nome dele é Zé Galinha. Um nego de olho vermelho, sempre cercado de puxa-sacos. Vai acabar vereador” (Fonseca 33).⁴⁶

Benevides disavows this Beggars' Union. However, he is able to see the political potential of such organization when he precisely traces a line between the subjective disposition of the marginal leader (regarding the force apparatus around him and other members of this class) and its official counterpart. The title of the Beggars' Union seems to mimic an organization that, strictly speaking, would apply only to the working class, and not to the lumpen proletariat. But this kind of rigorous distinction of classes that functions in theoretical terms is not verified in the social structure of the recognizable groups that live in the streets of the downtown. The promenader's contact with individual potential members of organized groups who disavow such groups tells a tale of the complexity of the social bonds sustained by the different factions with whom Augusto sets out to commune.

⁴⁶ “The other day a guy came here saying that he was organizing the beggars to form an association called Beggars United. I told him to scram. We are not beggars . . . His name was Zé Galinha. A black dude with red eyes, always surrounded by thugs. He's going to end up a councilman.

Intrigued by the idea of a Beggars' Union, Augusto follows the directions of Benevides and finds the quarters of their leader, who, after sorting out a confusion about the correct nomenclature for him and his group, reveals his group to be a conscious, organized, and contentious one. The distrust that Benevides showed towards the organization is reflected back in the opinion that the leader has about the man who has turned down his offering of a membership in his union.

Na esquina da praça Major Valô estão alguns homens e Augusto se dirige para eles... Um negro grande, sem camisa, pergunta “quem foi que disse que o meu nome é Zé Galinha?”...

“Foi Benevides”...

“Aquele nego bebo é um vendido, feliz por poder morar numa caixa de papelão, agradecido por poder apanhar papel na rua e vender pros tubarões. Esse tipo de gente não apóia nosso movimento”...

“Ele disse que o senhor é o presidente da União dos Mendigos”...

“Olha aqui, ô distinto, primeiro meu nome não é Zé Galinha, é Zumbi do Jogo da Bola, entendeu? E depois eu sou presidente de porra nenhuma de União dos Mendigos, isso é sacanagem da oposição. Nosso nome é União dos Desabrigados e Descamisados, a UDD. Nós não pedimos esmolas, não queremos esmolas, exigimos o que tiraram da gente. Não nos escondemos debaixo das pontes e dos viadutos ou dentro de caixas de papelão como esse puto de Benevides, nem vendemos chiclete e limão nos cruzamentos” (Fonseca 45).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ On the corner of the Major Valô Square there are some men and Augusto goes to them . . . A big black man, without a shirt, asks “who said that my name was Zé Galinha?” . . .

“It was Benevides” . . .

Their mutual dislike notwithstanding, Benevides and Zumbi share a despidal of asking for alms; what they are willing to do to survive without relying on charity, once more, separates them completely. The part of his plan that the king is willing to share with Augusto entails literally disrupting the normal flow of the leisure life of the upper-middle class. The strategy is simple enough and consists only in exaggerating the traces of their existence in a manner that cannot be overlooked by anyone who would come in contact with them. The plan is to offend the senses of the bourgeois families while they strut in the public parks of the well-to-do neighborhoods in the south of the city, in the same way that garbage offends them. The consign is to become reeking piles of human garbage.

“Queremos ser vistos, queremos que olhem a nossa feiúra, nossa sujeira, que sintam o nosso bodum em toda parte; que nos observem fazendo nossa comida, dormindo, fodendo, cagando nos lugares bonitos onde os bacanas passeiam ou moram. Dei ordem para os homens não fazerem a barba, para os homens e mulheres e crianças não tomarem banho nos chafarizes, nos chafarizes a gente mija e caga, temos que feder e enojar como um monte de lixo no meio da rua. E ninguém pede esmola. É preferível a gente roubar do que pedir esmola” (Fonseca 45-46).⁴⁸

“That guy is a sellout, he’s happy living in a cardboard shack, thankful for being able to pick up scraps of paper on the streets to sell to the recyclers. That kind of people doesn’t agree with our movement.” . . .

“He told me that you were the president of the Beggars’ Union” . . .

“Look, first of all, my name is not Zé Galinha, it’s Zumbi do Jogo da Bola, got it? And, I’m no president of any stupid Beggars’ Union. Our name is Union of Homeless and Haggard, the UHH. We don’t ask for alms, we demand what they have taken from us. We don’t hide underneath bridges or elevated roads, nor inside carton boxes like that Benevides fag, nor do we sell gum and limes at the traffic lights.”

⁴⁸ We want to be seen, we want all to look at our ugliness, our foulness, we want them to feel our stench everywhere, we want them to observe us cooking our meals, sleeping, fucking, shitting in the places where the rich stroll or live. I instructed the men not to shave; and all men, women, and children not to shower in the fountains, in the fountains we piss and shit, we have to stink and nauseate like a steaming pile of garbage in the middle of the street. And nobody asks for charity. We would steal before asking for charity.

The difference between Benevides' homeless family sleeping in cardboard boxes in the entryway of a bank and the "human piles of garbage in the middle of the street" resides in the pathos with which they confront their situation: One wants to latch onto the workings of the urban machine in whatever small capacity, while the others want to make it move differently. As a result, their perceptibility is completely different: The family works within the system that determined their material conditions, and so the obscene nature of their misery is carefully kept from the sight of passersby; the organized beggars, by contrast, want to exaggerate their condition as undigested remainders of the normal functioning of the city, by embracing the undeniable obscenity that is their very existence.

Zumbi embodies the unwillingness of the marginal class to be patronized by members of the middle class and the charity that helps assuage their conscience more than it helps the receivers of their Christian generosity. Ultimately, the province of the União dos Desabrigados e Descamisados is violence and retribution, rather than meek humility. What Zumbi and his organization want is to be an unavoidable nuisance in the lives of those who try to make the beggars disappear, along with the guilt that beggars induce in them, by throwing small change in their direction. But these homeless people are not amicable or endearing like some of the faces one can find in a tourist guide entry about the city's less fortunate population. Their image is not stripped of materiality; on the contrary, smell and sight are enhanced in a negative way to disturb more decidedly the urban landscape that Benevides would prefer to maintain unaltered. The homeless in Zumbi's union understand the unpalatable nature of their existence, and they understand the force of that discomfort. Their mere perceptibility is an interruption of the normal economy of the city, and a whiff of their *bodum* can jolt a distracted passerby and force him to see the fragmentary image of the remainder at the center of the marvelous city. Augusto, as a stranger, is only partially and momentarily

trusted, but that is enough for him to get a glimpse of the kind and the amount of power that a group like this can gather.

This is arguably the most significant image of the remainder in Fonseca's text—the dispossessed, the dregs of society, embracing their condition of waste-like by-product of the proper functioning of a big city. Similar to the overwhelming amount of excrement that kept Augusto preoccupied when he worked in the Sanitation Department, the beggars of the city represent a mechanism of alleviating the system. The difference between the rivers of excrement that run underneath the streets and the human “heap of trash” that Zumbi's people are instructed to turn themselves into is that, in the porous liminality of the center of the city, the un-stomacheable image of the remainder cannot be expected to remain underground and out of sight. But, to be sure, the biggest transgression that this organized community of dregs performs comes through the nose and not the eye.

Smell is alluded to in the story as the mark of materiality that effectively disrupts the quotidian unfolding of public life. Zumbi instructs his group not to wash themselves in the public fountains, but instead to defecate and urinate in them. They cultivate foul bodily odors to use them as a weapon with which to both resist the repression of the police and assault the bourgeoisie's selective attention by giving them no choice but to acknowledge their existence.

“Vocês não têm medo da polícia?”

“A polícia não tem lugar para botar a gente, as cadeias estão repletas e somos muitos. Ela prende e tem que soltar. E fedemos demais para eles terem vontade de bater na gente. Eles tiram a gente da rua e a gente volta. E se matarem algum de nós, e acho que isso vai acontecer a qualquer

momento, e é até bom que aconteça, a gente pega o corpo e exhibe a carcaça pelas ruas” (Fonseca 46).⁴⁹

An exhibition of a corpse is an extension of the exhibition of the obscene smell of misery. “It would even be a good thing,” says Zumbi, if a member of the union would get killed by the repression of the police because the corpse of one member, with the clear mark of violence imprinted in it, is an apt summary of the conditions of the whole group. This image has a potential for a sensorial eloquence that cannot be argued against. The human pile of trash in the middle of the street or the potential exhibited corpse of a homeless person murdered by the police are the decaying center of the city of Rio de Janeiro, which is impossible to contemplate in the same “coup d’oeil” with the phantasmagoria of the marvelousness of the city. The art of walking the streets of downtown means the willingness to behold this sight and commune with it.

Augusto/Epifânio, beholder of the modest, partial revelations of the streets, following his ideal of being a sort of “subterranean tree,” after the last violent image that Zumbi shares with him, wants to present the leader with the limb that allowed the promenader to supplement walking in his attempt to commune with the city: language. For Augusto, the significance of reading and writing is one of those profane epiphanies that his trade showed him. Maybe hoping to provide yet another tool—to supplement smell and sight—in the vindictive cause of Zumbi, he asks him the same question that he asks the prostitutes.

“Você sabe ler?”

“Se não soubesse ler estava morando feliz dentro de uma caixa de papelão apanhando restos” (Fonseca 46).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Aren’t you all afraid of the police?

The police don’t have space to lock us up, jails are replete and we are too many. They catch us and they have to let us go. Plus, we stink so bad that they don’t even want to hit us. They have to let us go and we go back at it. And if they killed one of us, and I think that could happen any time now, and it would even be good that it happened, we would take the body to exhibit the corpse on the streets”

⁵⁰ “Can you read?”

“If I couldn’t read, I would be living happily in a cardboard box and picking garbage.”

Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped*

– 1–

In her first novel, *El huésped*, (*The Guest*) Guadalupe Nettel tells the story of Ana, who from early on in her childhood felt she was inhabited by a doppelgänger which she calls *La Cosa*, *The Thing*. This unwelcome guest seems set on disturbing the protagonist's life to such an extent that even as a child, she is convinced that the day will come when she will have to surrender to *La Cosa* for the control of their shared existence. Ana spends her first years alternately getting to know and resisting the parasitic entity she believes shares her insides. It inhabits Ana's unconscious life, to the point that the child after a few years is not capable of ever remembering her dreams.

The parasitic entity that the protagonist imagines living inside her is the embodiment of an otherwise abstract notion of the remainder. *La Cosa* is a splinter of otherness that makes the subjective disposition of Ana function in perpetual tension between the traits that belong to her and their polar opposite. The following pages trace the stages of this subjective disarticulation, which takes place throughout the years, from the childhood days spent within a familial web of libidinal attachments and interruptions, to Ana's life as a young adult who steps outside her home to explore the political possibilities of her interactions with the subterranean realm of the city.

The first thing that Ana knows about her inner guest is that it is blind; “nada le resultaba tan hiriente como la luz, y si alguna vez llegaba a dominarme, me condenaría a la oscuridad más absoluta” ⁵¹ (Nettel 13). This split existence bears a mark of danger from its first manifestations, and the menace of future blindness provokes a great deal of anxiety in Ana, given the importance that sight has for the enactment of her desire.

⁵¹ Nothing hurt it so much as light did, and if one day it would dominate me, it'd condemn me to the most absolute darkness.”

It is not clear which comes first, the awareness of the menacing nature of *La Cosa*, or the awareness of the desire to possess her brother through a quotidian scopic exercise, but it is not long into the narration that Ana notices the relation between the two. The conflictive nature of her doppelgänger shows itself pervasively throughout her childhood days, with one exception: Ana's relation to her only brother, Diego. Ana speculates about the force of this relationship, which keeps it off limits for the influence of *La Cosa*, and concludes that Diego was a special case "[T]al vez porque era lo único que me interesaba cuidar y quizás apropiarme en algún momento de la vida" ⁵² (Nettel 16).

The relation between the siblings is sustained by the gaze more so than by any other medium. Ana's incestuous desire takes the form of a constant visual register of Diego's every move, and the mutual scopic contact opens a space of intimacy that is central in shaping the subjectivity of both children.

Eran tantos los años de observar cada uno de sus gestos, cada expresión, cada actitud, que Diego acabó por creer que yo sabía algo muy profundo acerca de él (...) Nuestras miradas estaban teñidas de una complicidad fincada en ese misterio. Diego buscaba en mis ojos una aprobación incondicional, ese "todo está bajo control" que al parecer yo le devolvía (Nettel 16-17).⁵³

La Cosa keeps clear from this intimate bond for some time, allowing Ana to freely act on her desire of working towards the complete possession of her brother. But all this changes one morning, after which the relation between Ana and *La Cosa* turns irreparably antagonistic. *La Cosa* displays all its devastating power precisely in the

⁵² Maybe because he was the only thing I wanted to preserve and maybe even claim for myself alone one day.

⁵³ It had been so many years of watching each of his gestures, each expression, each attitude, that Diego ended up convinced that I knew something very deep about him . . . Our looks were tinged with a complicity grounded on such mystery. Diego looked for unconditional approval in my eyes, that "everything is under control" that apparently I gave him in return.

middle of the play of glances and specular looks between the siblings, thus canceling the reflective, reassuring imaginary space they inhabited until then.

Había llegado a recargarme sobre la pared del baño para mirar su aseo cotidiano. Como siempre, él levantó la cara para saludarme en el espejo (...) se quedó atónito, como si hubiera visto algo en el reflejo que a mí se me había escapado: su cara se transformó y desde mi lugar supe que se había roto algo.

—¡Qué estás mirando así!—gritó con la mezcla de enojo y pavor de quien se siente amenazado. Supongo que en ese momento reconoció a *La Cosa* o por lo menos la vio pasar sobre mis córneas como se desliza una sombra. No pude responder a su pregunta, me di la vuelta y fui a encerrarme a mi cuarto (Nettel 21-22).⁵⁴

As a sort of Medusa, *La Cosa* kills Diego after seeing the reflection of its gaze on the surface of the mirror. This is the moment when the transgressive nature of Ana's desire to appropriate her brother is evident to her brother and more importantly, to herself. What Ana sees in her brother's gaze is the "indigestible" remainder of her own desire along with the mark of terror and anger that Diego confers it. This episode is devastating for Ana, who afterwards is convinced that *La Cosa* started killing Diego that same day, and that it will slowly take control of her life, condemning her, among other things, to go blind. The shame that makes her run to her room after this episode makes Ana's own desire unbearable to contemplate, so instead she displaces it and she attributes the responsibility of her break with her Diego to *La Cosa*. Even when Ana suggests that *La Cosa* and the more genuine part of her self have different wills, she still

⁵⁴ I had come to lean against the bathroom wall to witness his daily hygienic routine. As usual, he lifted his face to greet me on the mirror . . . my brother was startled, as if he had seen something in the reflection that had slipped from me; his expression changed and from where I was standing I knew that something had broken.

—What are you looking at! —he screamed with the mixture of rage and terror of someone who feels threatened. I guess he had recognized The Thing or at least saw it pass over my corneas like a fleeting shadow. I could not reply to his question, I turned around and went to lock myself in my room.

feels alluded to by the shame and guilt that resulted from that fateful encounter of gazes. The impossibility of accepting that her desire should be experienced by its object as something terrifying deepens the fragmentation at the core of Ana's self.

The corollary to this fragmentation is the intensification of the menace of blindness, which is made only more powerful after her grandmother convinces Ana that keeping physical mementos is an unsuccessful way to preserve memories. Standing in a staircase reminiscent of the place where her brother died, Ana, ten years old, decides that from then on in, and for the next ten years, she was to keep only the images of those she loved to preserve them from *La Cosa* (45). This is the moment when she begins the exercise of building a *recuerdoteca* (an archive of memories), collecting fragmentary images of minutiae of her every day, so as to be able to recreate them with her eyes closed and at will.

Conservar en la memoria todas las imágenes posibles, construir una recuerdoteca, era hacer un homenaje de mí misma, algo como la caja que mi madre guardaba con las fotos de su despampanante juventud (Nettel 55-56).⁵⁵

Just like her mother kept pictures to contemplate the image of her seductive younger self, Ana plans a tribute to an important part of herself. Even though, in principle, she plans the "recuerdoteca" to keep the memories of her loved ones, she does not seem to pay any attention to any other family member after Diego passes. Rather, her archive of memories seems to preserve only the exercise of seeing in itself as the site where she used to enact her desire.

⁵⁵ To keep the memory of as many images as possible, to build a "memory-library," was to make a homage to myself, something like the box that my mother kept with the pictures of her ravishing youth.

– 2 –

Ana describes herself as a shy, introvert of a child; her relationships with other children—with the exception of Diego—are mostly superficial, circumstantial ones. This is the context in which *La Cosa* first disrupts the child's outward life, making it obvious that another of its central traits was its violent nature. After an confusing exchange between Ana and one of her schoolmates, she realizes that *La Cosa* manifested and attacked the other girl physically. Ana did not have any memory of this incident, and it is only after a while that she conjectures that her doppelgänger must be the one to blame. This episode inaugurates a direct, ever-developing relation between the actions of *La Cosa* and an enduring feeling of guilt in Ana. Fear is an early mediator between Ana and her compounded subjectivity; she is afraid of the things that she could do without realizing it. Accepting the consequences of the actions orchestrated by that guest that she feels growing inside her, means that at some semi-conscious level Ana is not completely severed from that strange presence. She is never able to fully disavow a sense of responsibility for the actions of *La Cosa*, although, according to her own account, they are not governed by unified wants or volition. Fear and guilt are, therefore, the most decisive warrantors of her subjective unity.

Anxiety is a logical corollary to accepting a fear and guilt-inducing entity as part of one's subjectivity lot. Anxiety also prepares Ana for the possibility of increasingly disturbing manifestation of *La Cosa* in her life. So, when *La Cosa* reveals itself interrupting the specular play of the siblings, Ana is already somewhat prepared for this scenario, and after witnessing how her fear of herself is justified, her anxiety turns into shame.

Just like the attachment and the break between the children was explained in terms of the cancelation of their scopic relation, shame is also marked by a change in the dynamics of the eye. Desire and shame travel through the same optic conduct, but in radically different dispositions. Before, Ana's look reassured her brother by the tacit promise of contention that it offered, but after the irruption of *La Cosa* between them, her eyes are but a remainder inflamed with residual, guilt-inducing desire. "Mis ojos habían dejado de serle imprescindibles. Ante su indiferencia, yo no tenía más remedio que dejar caer los párpados y buscar solo las huellas de sus pasos" (Nettel 24). Being caught in the enactment of her desire to possess her brother through her sight, Ana's access to that eroticized act is interrupted by shame, but her access to the erogenous organ—the eye—continues, albeit transformed.

Before that morning in the bathroom, sight used to activate a space of intimacy shared by the two siblings from which it was possible to fantasize about total possession of the object of desire; after that morning, direct eye contact is cancelled forcing the surplus of erotic energy to find a different possible configuration. But, the text shows that it was not only a matter of diverting that energy towards a new object of attachment, but a complete relocation and redistribution of desire in the edifice of subjectivity. Something definite ended in that exchange in the bathroom.

Whatever makes Ana drop down her eyelids is a compounded scopic phenomenon that carries with it the traces of her and Diego's looks. Their relation functioned as an exchange of precious contents; Ana's loving eye was the vessel that kept and warranted the existence of the mystery at the foundation of Diego's subjectivity. The sharing of that mystery, as Ana says, cemented the cogency of the boy's self and assigned roles to both siblings in that exchange: Diego was the precious unified master, while Ana was the fragmented, anxious—and ultimately leaky—container in charge of maintaining the master's unity. Ana betrays her assigned position when she lets her own active desire of possession show for a fleeting moment.

That morning in the bathroom she gets too close to the core of her desire: the alluring mystery that organized the boy as a subject, a mystery that Ana, as its keeper, knows to be void.

Ana runs away from the bathroom because, somehow, through the play of reflections in the mirror, *La Cosa* showed its head, shattering the fantasy of the object of desire, and showing Ana a glimpse of her own desire as only an indigestible shell surrounding a void. From then on, her use of her eye changes into a mechanism of control to fend off the total annihilation of the last dregs of her desire; her sight —aided by the collection of actual material refuse— works as a “mourning machine” bent on preserving the memory of a more fluid exercise of desire. This machine, bearing the marks of a fundamental rift, is the new repository of Ana’s obsessive attachment.

– 3 –

Material detritus linked to the preservation of memory have a definite emotional pull for Ana, running sometimes parallel to the role of the sight, but ultimately departing from it. Sight and matter offer two different paths to access the desire of the girl. Gaze opened and cancelled an intimate emotional space of cohabitation with the object of her desire; in the wake of this intimacy, the only role left for her well-exercised eye was that of record-keeper. Matter, bodily excreta turned relics, were central to Ana’s attempt to preserve the bond to her brother, which is to say that they acted as a fetish that preserved an indirect point of access to her own desire.

Tying desire to organic detritus brings into focus the problem of impermanence and decomposition. Trying her hand at preservation, Ana teaches herself to capture the form and color of flowers, by pressing them while fresh unto a white piece of

cardboard, only to discover a few weeks later that the colors, bright at the beginning, did all but vanished from the paper. She turns to her grandmother for help, and receives a disdainful response: “Hay cosas más importantes . . . que se echan a perder en menos tiempo” (Nettel 25). The grandmother explains that mementos are not the most effective devices to preserve an image, and that the only way to preserve the color of flowers is to remember them well. But to be sure, even memory is not impervious to decay, and when memories decompose they also let out a fetid smell.

La abuela fue por la botella de whisky y permaneció en mi habitación un rato más, describiendo el olor que tienen los recuerdos una vez que se echan a perder y, de la misma manera que yo había esparcido mis dibujos ante sus ojos desencantados, se puso a contarme su vida. Escenas remotas de una juventud provinciana circularon por mis oídos . . . Cuando al fin se marchó, saqué los cartoncillos de la maleta, decidida a dejar toda esa basura en su casa y a llevarme solo su último consejo (Nettel 25-26).⁵⁶

Well aware of their vulnerability for decay, Ana leaves behind her experiments in material preservation, calling them garbage. She keeps the immaterial advise of one who has to renounce her own desire, keeping only a few snapshots of her youth that have lost all traces of their past seduction. The memories of a “provincial youth” are displayed in front of Ana like the parade of colorful epitaphs harpooned by a pin between the wings: dried up trophies of an insect collector (Nettel 56). Ana describes her grandmother as a sceptic, uninterested in anything besides playing *solitaire* and drinking whisky, and it is precisely she—the herald of a future devoid of desire—from whom the child accepts advice.

⁵⁶ My grandmother went to get the bottle of whisky and remained in my bedroom a while longer, describing the smell of the memories gone bad and, just as I had spread my drawings in front of her disenchanted eyes, she got to tell me her life. Remote scenes of a provincial youth circulated through my ears . . . When she finally left, I took out the cards from my suitcase, determined to leave all that garbage in her house and take with me but her last piece of advice.

After that summer of futile flower printing, there seems to be an excess of psychic energy that organic material traces of desire unleash in Ana. She imagines a cumulative archive of the traces of desire of *all humanity*, and finds this fantasy unbearable. Ashes are, for Ana, this ultimate archive, that provoke in the child an incontrollable anxiety not unlike vertigo. She spends nights awake, terrified conjuring the image of the desert, which she fantasizes is made up of all the ashes of history: “las de los cuerpos humanos principalmente, pero también los incendios, las ruinas de todos los bombardeos, la basura quemada, los huesos de las ballenas, todo estaba concentrado ahí en esas dunas silenciosas” ⁵⁷ (Nettel 27).

In the months after the episode in the bathroom, Ana follows around the object of her desire, Diego, as she begins an obsessive visual archive of his image, as well as a collection of material traces left by the boy.

[...] no me cansaba de mirarlo, intentando rescatar con la memoria algún fragmento de ese cuerpo amado que sin darme cuenta, había comenzado a extrañar. Sus labios blanquecinos, su cabello oscuro y un poco largo, la suavidad de su piel eran reliquias sagradas a las que me aferraba sin pudor. Cuando por casualidad uno de esos cabellos caía sobre la alfombra, me apresuraba a recogerlo y a depositarlo en un sobre. Así logré recolectar una serie muy pequeña de sus últimas huellas; un pañuelo sucio, un tenedor que hubiera tocado sus labios, restos de unas. Cualquier vestigio desprendido de su persona representaba para mí un tesoro de incalculable valor (Nettel 32).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ mainly those from human bodies, but also those from fires, from the ruins of all the bombarded cities, from burnt garbage, from the bones of the whales, everything was concentrated there in those silent dunes.

⁵⁸ I never grew tired of looking at him, trying to rescue with my memory some fragment of that beloved body that, without my noticing, I had began missing. His pale lips, his dark, longish hair, the softness of his skin were sacred relics to which I clung shamelessly. When, by chance, one of those hairs fell on the rug, I quickly picked it up and put it in an envelope. I got to collect a very brief series of his last traces like that; a used tissue, a fork that had touched his lips, nail clippings. Any vestige of his being represented for me a treasure of incalculable value.

Memory —and not desire— is at stake in this exercise. Ana's desire is arrested by shame and guilt, while the memory of her enacted desire —her scopic ownership of the Diego— is what she tries to preserve while her brother is still alive. Once Diego's material existence is also pure waste ("un enorme desperdicio"), visual memories will have precedence over bodily relics.

– 4 –

Even though Ana's Thing had been living alongside of her more easily-appropriable self, their radical antagonism is not declared until after the episode between Ana and Diego in the bathroom. With the boy's death, Ana is left alone with her doppelgänger as her only mirror, which has already revealed itself to be a sort of "negative mold" that reverses Ana's consciously sanctioned traits. The rationale of this schism is one of complementarity and full/void correspondences.

Era el eco, mejor dicho el espejo que invertía cada una de mis emociones. Cuando yo estaba triste, de ese lado el canto me parecía más alegre. En cambio, cuando éste se escuchaba inconsolable mi ánimo subía, aligerado de pronto por la tragedia ajena... [Éramos] presas de una misma tormenta, unidas por una ley extraña que me hacía hundirme cuando ella salía a flote y respirar cuando ella zozobraba (Nettel 85).⁵⁹

If Ana's conscious self masters sight as her preferred sensorial channel of contact with the world, then *La Cosa* must be blind and deaf with a pronounced inclination toward

⁵⁹ It was the echo, or better yet, the mirror that inverted each of my emotions. When I was sad, on that side the song became happier. Conversely, when that side sounded inconsolable, my mood elevated, lightened suddenly by the other's tragedy . . . [We were] prisoners of one single storm, united by a strange law that made me sink when she floated and breathe when she struggled.

the sense of smell. Ana, as a child, makes an effort to behave well while *La Cosa* is remarkably violent. Ana cherishes the intimate space she shared with Diego, while *La Cosa* breaks that bond by showing the boy a glimpse of the terrifying side of that desire.

This division, with its reference to space, establishes the subjective disposition of Ana as a mostly symmetrically partitioned self, which seems to build on an allegorical relation between top and bottom. The tangible, heavier, darker traits of their character sink to the bottom, while the more abstract, lighter ones remain on the surface. It is assumed that whichever part —Ana or *La Cosa*— has control over their shared existence will be primarily on the surface, defining their mode of contact with the world. The battleground for this confrontation is the body, which is referred to in different instances as a house; Ana has, for the most part, control over the main space while the province of *La Cosa* is the dark, humid basement. But along with the threat of blindness, and deafness, Ana fears that their spatial relation will also be inverted if *La Cosa* ever wins the war for the control of their common body.

... Una vez que me desterrara al sótano donde yo la había tenido hasta entonces, mi existencia quedaría reducida a la de una amiba. Cuando eso ocurriera yo iba a ser su lado oscuro, su vergüenza, su pariente pobre (Nettel 23).⁶⁰

The central concerns in the wake of Ana's break with Diego —decay and the preservation of memories— are displaced inwards, and distributed following the logic of the schism between top and bottom. The basement is the place of decay, where even memories were at risk of decomposing. Wondering about the possible memories of *La Cosa* Ana concludes that “su memoria debía de ser húmeda como un sótano que nadie

⁶⁰ Once banished to the basement where I had kept her until then, then my existence would be reduced to that of an amoeba. When that happened I would be her dark side, her shame, her impoverished relative.

visita y donde los hongos han invadido el territorio, una covacha de topo resentido”⁶¹ (Nettel 56).

This spatial disposition allows Ana to contemplate the void she sensed inside herself after the debacle of her relationship with her brother, and she is able to do that without collapsing by placing a sliver of distance (that which separates the underground from the surface) between her and that void. At the same time, this split also carves up a space of suspension which ensures Ana’s continuing to function “as if” the void were not gazing directly at her and hollering at her vertigo.

Looming in the very notion of suspension is the promise of resumed motion. In other words, Ana can only fend off the consequences of acknowledging the void at her center for so long. Although described at one point as a mirror, *La Cosa* cannot be trusted as a reflecting surface. It shows Ana alternatively too much and not enough about herself; it seems to know something as profound about Ana as she did about Diego at some point, but the possibility of being reassured about her subject position through an extended contemplation of this mirror is barred by the intensity of the threat of blindness and decay. Instead of giving back the alluring fantasy of “everything being fine” that Ana’s gave to Diego through her look, the image in the subterranean reflecting surface of *La Cosa* showed Ana decaying, fractured, and scattered.

– 5 –

After spending nearly a decade narcissistically involved in the contemplation of her own scopic fixation (of which the menace of blindness can be read as a manifestation),

⁶¹ her memory ought to be damp as the basement that no one ever visits where fungi had conquered the territory, a resentful mole cave.

Ana turns her sight outwards for the first time. The collection of visual minutiae for her self-homaging “recuerdoteca” leads her attention to the world as in a constant close up of very minor, fragmentary images. But it is only after the encounter of the city as a monumental, emotionally charged assembly of different spaces that Ana finds a new possible mirror. The grid of the streets and its relation to the hidden, underground net of tunnels and galleries offer a screen onto which Ana projects the rift between the two entities that struggle to control her existence.

The lower province of *La Cosa*, finds its correspondence in the space of the galleries of the subway, the city’s unconscious. Little by little, Ana starts seeing signs of decay—of the city’s own Thing’s triumph—in the surface of the city, which open cracks and inaugurate empty spaces systematically disavowed by the people, choosing not to notice them. After she abandons her house as the theater of her childhood days and obsessions, the dreaded advance of *La Cosa* begins to take place and it is noticeable on Ana’s appearance —the visible surface of the body— just as much in herself as in the city. The role that the city plays as Ana’s extended body is paramount to step out of the impasse held for ten years regarding her relation to her doppelgänger. During that decade of suspension, the main investment of Ana’s libidinal energy goes to fuel her sight as mourning-machine, which means that energy is poured inward in a kind of masturbatory obsession.

Ana strolls around the city, occupied by a temporary volunteering job reading for the blind in an institute, and later on by clandestine meeting she has with the leaders of a group of pariahs living in the tunnel system of the subway. In these forays Ana becomes increasingly aware of the double life of the city with a superficial appearance governed by a fantasy of unity and subjective integrity, and its corresponding “pariente pobre,” the underground world.

Constantemente, el espacio deja de existir y la gente, obstinada en negarlo, sigue hablando de edificios, estatuas, cines que hace mucho derrumbaron

... México ya no nos pertenece. Hemos desarrollado un ojo selectivo que fragmenta y edita los teléfonos descompuestos, los vidrios rotos, la señora que tiritita en su rebozo, sentada en la banqueta, los desagües constipados, el asalto que sucede enfrente de nuestras narices. La ciudad que elegimos ver es una fachada hueca que cubre los escombros de todos nuestros temblores (Nettel 174-175).⁶²

Thus, the city's surface above ground becomes only a sort of screen for the projection of images salvaged from the collective memory archive, but they lack an indexical correspondence with the corners of the city where the signs of decay start to alter its façade. The collective fantasy also works as a "mourning machine" that evokes a willful fantasy of another, better, mythical time before all the collectively-experienced catastrophic breaks. Just like Diego at one point, the city reveals itself as impossible to possess, because the mystery of its core is a collectively sustained phantasmagoria of a whole that is no more. The void at its center shows through the cracks in the liminal space that separates the surface from the underground, where decomposition and fragmentation seeps from one space to the other.

The city splits and unfolds its double, its own parasite, thus inviting Ana's identification. Once established, the link between the city and the body serves the protagonist to find new instances of exploration of her own fragmentary character; contemplating *LA COSA URBANA* Ana is able to contemplate also her own constitutive void askew.

– 6 –

At this outwardly turned stage, the libidinal energy of Ana, continues to be reconfigured and redistributed. The new object of her attachment in the underground

⁶² Space constantly disappears and people, set on denial, keep talking about buildings, statues, movie theaters long demolished . . . Mexico is no longer ours. We've developed a selective eye that fragments and cuts out the public phones out of service, the broken windows, the woman sitting on the sidewalk who shivers in her wrap, the constipated drainages, the mugging that happens right in front of our noses. The city we choose to see is a hollow façade that covers the rubble of all our tremors.

space of the city and its inhabitants; after making the acquaintance of an amputee nicknamed El Cacho (The Bit), Ana comes in contact with a community of blind people and other beggars that live mainly in the tunnels of the subway. Her self-involvement is interrupted by these presences, which she begins to think of as benign in their “uncorrupted misery.” With this new object of attachment, it is evident that for Ana the idea of the underground begins to disaggregate itself from the anxiety-inducing presence of *La Cosa*, and even material detritus regain their positive valence after being treated solely as heralds of decay and diligently avoided.

Finally, the immersion of Ana in the subterranean realm of the subway in Mexico City, announces her giving in to the lower side of her psychic edifice in general, letting some traits of *La Cosa* to surface in herself. The sense of dread that guided her relation to *La Cosa* during the better part of her life, is not alluded to anymore by the end of the narration. The last phrase, actually seems to suggest that all the dread was instead merely misunderstood anticipation. One of the group’s leader called Madero explains to Ana the historical importance of subterranean dwelling, implying that there is an inverse relation between the life at the surface of the city and underground, noting that to Mexico City’s unfathomable chaos, corresponded an splendid subterranean space, quiet and clean. Madero also explains that the marginal subject of all geographies and historical moments have an affinity with the underworld of catacombs and the underground in general.

This conversation is the prelude of Ana’s rite of passage that seals her belonging to the group of blind beggars. As she walks in to one of the many rooms in the subway tunnels guided by El Cacho, she sees ten to twelve people frantically, but carefully taking something out of a series of sacks and placing it inside small envelopes. Invited to participate in the collective endeavor, she asks and finds out that the matter being distributed in the envelopes is human excrement. She rolls up her sleeves and applies herself to the task, making a discovery in the process.

En ese ambiente contenido, una mezcla de ceremonia sectaria y carnaval, encontré algo que no había experimentado en años: fraternidad en el sentido más cotidiano; tropezarse con los demás; sentir sus cuerpos cerca. Distinguir sus olores –por más fuertes que fueran– era de alguna forma grato, pues distraía del tufo de los costales. Además estaba el Cacho, trabajando muy de cerca ... esos brazos fuertes de tanto llevar el peso de una pierna inexistente, estaban ahora manchados hasta el codo y entre la pasta café, que ya se estaba secando, sobresalía una capa de vello oscuro. Pensé que ahí, en medio de toda esa mierda, algo germinaría (Nettel 142-144).⁶³

The purpose of this scatological exercise is to make an intervention in the coming election of the Mexican House of Representatives. The envelopes carrying excrement were to substitute regular ballots as a commentary on the corruption of the nation's democratic system. But the plan ultimately fails completely when Ana and another group member called Marisol are in charge of distributing the envelopes in different locations, and they are caught by the police. Ana runs off, but Marisol is taken into custody, and then tortured, killed and disposed off on a ditch in the outskirts of the city. After this incident, the rekindled possibility of fraternal communion that Ana had sensed during the afternoon she spent manipulating human excrement is cancelled by an overwhelming sense of shame, once more.

Failing to transpose her libidinal attachment onto the group, Ana slips back into her self-involvement and crippling sense of guilt. Only this time the ever-looming threat of losing access to her most libidinally charged organ is realized, definitely. Two

⁶³ In that contained environment, a combination of sectarian ceremony and carnival, I found something I hadn't experienced in years: fraternity in the most ordinary of senses, bumping into others, feeling their bodies near. Distinguishing their smells –however strong they were– was in a way pleasant, since it distracted me from the reek of the sacks. Besides there was El Cacho, working very near . . . those arms strengthened by having to carry the weight of an absent leg, were now soiled up to the elbow, and among the brown paste, which had begun to dry, I could see a layer of dark hair. It occurred to me that there, among all that shit, something would sprout.

days after hearing about Marisol's violent death, Ana goes completely blind. At this point, Ana decides to descend into the underworld of the subway for good, in what seems a rushed decision taken under the influence of acute shame and guilt.

The human remains appeared briefly as the repository of the possibility of bridging over the void at her core and thus re establishing her intersubjective, more fluid desiring machine. Once more, guilt and shame force libidinal energy to redistribute it very differently.

– 7 –

In the end, Ana embraces life underground, subverting the separation between inside and out, in favor of a newly found form of coexistence with *La Cosa*: inhabiting the basement but still conscious; blind but at peace. There is also a kind of sensorial dialectical movement between the blindness of Ana and the lucidity she gains in her new subterranean realm. What is it that this lucidity illuminates? The response is far from obvious in the narration.

Caminé hasta la boca del metro y me dejé engullir como una gragea ...
Desde ahora, el metro sería mi hogar. Mientras yo permanecía sentada en esa escalera sin rumbo, mi mente se fue despejando. Poco a poco, el miedo desapareció en favor de un estado muy distinto. Ya no veía las formas, pero la luz comenzó a volverse más intensa. Había una transparencia inusitada en el aire. Esa claridad me envolvió por completo, como una lucidez insospechada, la sensación armoniosa de un orden inapelable o quizá la convicción de que conmigo se haría justicia. El mal olor de las cañerías, los empujones de la gente, el ruido, lo ocurrido con el Cacho,

incluso la muerte de Marisol, todo lo que me rodeaba era perfecto y no tenía por qué ser de otra forma. Poco importaba entonces dónde elegía vivir, no había fuera ni dentro, libertad o encierro, sólo esa paz imperturbable y nueva.

‘Por fin llegas’, dije en voz baja, y por toda respuesta recibí un escalofrío (Nettel 188-189).⁶⁴

There is a somewhat vague reference to justice, and it is almost inevitable to read it as acceptance of blindness as the appropriate punishment to her guilt-laden, inappropriate display of desire. So, according to this possible reading, there is nothing liberating about this peace; instead it would be a peace paid for dearly. The price is nothing less than the complete surrender of the libidinally charged organ in exchange for an ascetic life for which the protagonist would be ill-prepared. Going to live among the marginals entails no revolutionary potential, now that she would be nothing but a blind among many, with no access to her desiring machine. The peace would come in this case from the certainty that the worse that could happen, happened.

Whether the ending of the novel suggests the triumph of *La Cosa* over Ana, or rather shows the second half of the novel as a ruse thanks to which Ana at least can escape anxiety and fright, the fact remains that the polarization of the extremes — seeing/blind, top/bottom, memory/decay— that drove the first half seems to give way to a different form of struggle to redefine her location with respect to the lower realm of herself and of her social context. The plot for political intervention is not followed

⁶⁴ I walked to the subway entrance and I let myself be swallowed as a pill . . . From now on, the subway would be my home. While I was sitting on that aimless flight of stairs, my mind started clearing out. Little by little, fear disappeared in favor of a very different mood. I couldn’t make out shapes any longer, but light started getting more intense. There was a new transparency in the air. That clarity enveloped me completely, as an unexpected lucidity, the harmonious sensation of an unquestionable order or perhaps the conviction that with me, justice would be done. The foul smell of the sewer, the shoves of the people, the noise, what happened with el Cacho, even Marisol’s death, everything around me was perfect and it didn’t have to be any other way. Little did it matter where I chose to live, there was no out nor inside, freedom or imprisonment, only this peace imperturbable and new.

“At last, you’re here,” I said softly, and I felt a shudder in response.

through, at least not by Ana who does not contact the group at all in the days following the debacle of the plan. So that kind of politicization of the protagonist is a possibility just opened but not fully explored. But the reshaping of her split subjectivity passes through a definite and lasting immersion in the plural fragmentary character of the subterranean society, which requires a different political disposition, one that calls for a complete identification with the effluence of the city's upper body, which drips down to the underground.

Human Remains: shock, improvisation and politics

— 1 —

In his 1966 brief text *El Baldío* (*The Vacant Lot*), Augusto Roa Bastos creates a parable for the phenomenon of disarticulation and recomposition that the human animal goes through when confronted with a material reminder of his own organic finitude. When a nameless character in Roa Bastos' story is forced to drag the cadaver of another man—similar to the protagonist in every aspect except for his being dead—in the middle of the night, through a vacant lot where garbage and animal excrement accumulates, the weight of the inert body combines with the smell of organic decay and with the sticky heat that oppresses the city. This mixture proves too intense a sensorial stimulus for the protagonist who succumbs to panic and resigns himself to abandon the cadaver right there, covering it only with trash as the humblest of burial mounds. Just as the character is about to flee the vacant lot under a menacing sky brightened by lightning bolts, he stops to listen a muffled sob coming from the pile of trash. After a moment of doubt, the man kneels down to blindly investigate the ground with his hands; he uncovers a wet and inconsolable creature who cries desperately. The man hesitates again, struggling with a sickening feeling of long-forgotten tenderness, which overwhelms him while he holds the baby closer to his chest. This is the moment posterior to sensorial shock, a moment when a new set of conditions appear in the field of possibility and the protagonist must act, forced to improvise by sensorial shock and surprise. In Roa Bastos' story, the man, after a brief moment alone with the cry and the smell and the unctuous feel of the air, leaves the vacant lot, still carrying the sobbing creature.

The sensorially shocking conditions described in Roa Bastos' text inscribe the beginning of the story in a register that privileges the life of the body over reason. Nothing is said about the identities of the two characters as one drags the other around, except the physical dimension of their likeness; their faces are swallowed by darkness as is the context of the vacant lot. This is an anonymous story, unattached to any geographical or even a clear historical specificity. Only the sensorial stimuli are described in detail.

The smell from the stream's stagnant water must have been everywhere, now even more with the sweetish stench of the lot reeking of rust, animal feces, the pasty smell that comes from the threat of bad weather which the man would wave away from time to time, peeling it off his face (Roa Bastos 205).

Going back to Freud's explanation of the archaic nature of the olfactory sensorium, we are reminded of how it precedes the rising of the human animal to stand on two legs, and thus how it also predates the predominance of sight, which evolutionarily surpasses the reliance of the human afferent system on smell. The general darkness that looms over the descriptions of Roa Bastos' makes for a narrative context of blind reliance on sound, touch, and above all on smell. And in this oppressive environment panic arises as a flight mechanism that overtakes the protagonist's will, and makes him renounce any intention of securely hiding the dead body in the densest of the thicket. Instead he succumbs to the difficulty of the march, made worse by the rest of above described sensorial stimuli. Then, it is a cry—an expression of general animality more than it is one of particular humanity—that reverses the flight response and makes him stay and look for the crying creature.

At this point, the protagonist must make a choice for which he had no way of being prepared. Immediately following a gesture of human detachment and reversion into pure self-preserving animality (his abandoning that dead body which was so

similar to himself), he comes through to the other side of his immersion in material decay to chose to enter into a new affective configuration of attachment; one that extends the animalistic relatedness of two living bodies of the same species into a relation already inscribed in the social tissue.

In the texts and visual works analyzed in this chapter, instances of the same phenomenon can be traced. In *Operación masacre*, the author and narrator, Rodolfo Walsh is exposed to the image—first verbally and then materially—of an “talking dead” who survived an illegal execution orchestrated by a de facto government in Argentina; Walsh’s response to this encounter goes well beyond the writing of the book that sought to elucidate the circumstances of this crime, and it took the form of a life-long political militancy, which put him on a path that eventually led him to his apprehension, disappearance, and illegal execution. Artur Barrio intervened the streets of Brazilian cities with his “bloody bundles” made out of rotting animal matter and effluvia; the artist aimed at mobilizing the passersby by the conjunction of sensorial shock and unspoken fears of political repression right at the moment when the Brazilian dictatorship began its most repressive years. Rubem Fonseca and Guadalupe Nettel write in their protagonists a familiarity with the parasitical, excremental realm of human existence, which allows for and develops into different political gestures that require a disarticulation of the social subjectivity of the protagonists. This reiterated move of willing affective reattachment after a moment of sensorial shock is what I will elaborate in the following pages as a form of political mobilization under the sign of notions like *care*, *solidarity* and *love*.

— 2 —

In his 1940 “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin incorporated the Freudian notion of shock into the historical materialist project of which the essay on Baudelaire was part. Central to the understanding of the historical situation of the poet in the context of the material circumstances in place in a 19th century Paris is the image of the human consciousness as a protecting shield that fends off excessive sensorial stimuli that could overwhelm the psyche.

In Freud’s view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli. “For a living organism, protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli. The protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy and must above all strive to preserve the special forms of conversion of energy operating in it against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world” The threat posed by these energies is the threat of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect (Benjamin “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 317).

Benjamin traces the evidence of these shocks, these instances of the overwhelming of the sensorium that characterize the irruption of the new urban masses and an accelerated pace into the daily lives of Parisians. The inadequacy of the human body to adapt to the new historical circumstances at the same rate they were being produced opens a space of alienation that would come to determine the relation of the human animal to the material world that high capitalism created. For Benjamin, Baudelaire’s poems and Proust’s prose serve as symbolic spaces for the exploration of the interaction

between shock, consciousness and memory, at a moment when the philosopher's own material conditions of possibility were being fatally curtailed by a new historical formulation of shock.

Seventeen years after Benjamin's essay and on a completely different geopolitical context, appears Rodolfo Walsh's piece of investigative fiction *Operación masacre*, which as I have suggested in previous pages, can be read as the beginning of the political unraveling of its author after being exposed to the image of a "talking dead" who was an early victim of the rabid anti-Peronism that has defined Argentina's political landscape for decades. The first notice that Walsh ever had of the existence of Juan Carlos Livraga came in the form of a rumor that reached him, in December 1956, at the table where he spent the afternoons playing chess in La Plata: months before there had been some illegal shootings in a garbage dump in José León Suárez, ordered by the de facto president General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, and there had been one survivor—*hay un fusilado que vive*. This grotesque image serves as the trigger that mobilizes Walsh to start an investigation that took him outside of his professional comfort zone, since, as he admitted on occasion, before writing *Operación masacre* he had never been all that interested in politics, and he had been convinced—during the first few months of the anti-Peronist coup—of the general benefit of the ousting of the General Juan Domingo Perón.

After just a few weeks of following the waning trace of the survivor to whom nobody seemed to pay close attention, Walsh met Juan Carlos Livraga for the first time. This was the foundational moment of *Operación masacre* as a project, and of the author's political militancy, which unfolded for the following twenty years. It all began with the sighting of a face that registered the violent trace of that particular historical moment. The diffuse unrest that the rumor had stirred in Walsh became the full-blown force that saw the writer through the following year, taking on a false identity, hiding out in badly

heated houses, carrying a gun, and surviving with little to no money while gathering information about the shootings in José León Suárez.

What was it in that tortured body that so moved Walsh? What strings of the sensorium of the young writer did it touch? What chain of associations did it set off? The (partial) response that I want to offer here points to the meaningful liminal space that the body of the survivor made visible. The body of Juan Carlos Livraga, with its “broken mouth and dull eyes where a shadow of death still floats,” is as much part of the symbolic community of the living as it is a historical object that lies beyond the limits of organic life. In other words, the body of Juan Carlos Livraga dug so deep into Walsh’s psyche because it inhabited the space of the *undead*.

Eric Santner in his 2001 book, *On Creaturely Life*, illuminates the philosophical lineage of the concept alluded in the title. The *creaturely*, Santner proposes, is a symbolic category that names certain areas of the life of the animal from which human beings are not excluded, but with which we have a relationship of estrangement and alienation. According to Santner, the work of Walter Benjamin offers a fertile ground to think about the creaturely, especially in the philosopher’s explanation in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* of the connection between melancholia, the creaturely, and his “idiosyncratic concept of natural history” (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 16). The implication is that Benjamin argues that melancholia is the most *creaturely* of the contemplation impulses, which takes place mostly in the realm of natural history. Santner continues:

In Benjamin’s parlance, *Naturgeschichte* [refers] not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life (think of the process whereby architectural ruins are reclaimed by nature) . . . when an artifact loses its place in a historical form of life—when that form of life decays, becomes

exhausted, or dies—we experience it as something that has been *denaturalized*, transformed into a mere relic of historical being. To put it yet another way, natural history is born out of the dual possibilities that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality. Natural history transpires against the background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the “undead” (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 16-17).

Juan Carlos Livraga had no connection to the failed attempt to spark a Peronist revolution, which the government of Aramburu suffocated in part by ordering a series of arrests and sudden, illegal executions—without the mediation of any trial and in a matter of a few hours. His lack of involvement notwithstanding, he was dragged out of a social gathering one night, arrested, taken to jail for a few hours, driven to a remote location, shot at and wounded, taken to a hospital, taken again to jail where he remained unattended in the hope that he would die from his wounds until his family succeeded in locating him and proving his innocence.

The fact that he was among the seven men that escaped the shootings alive was material evidence of the double failure of the *de facto* government to legitimize and secure its permanence in power. Aramburu was not able to muster either enough popular traction to avoid an insurrection or legal integrity to lawfully fend off an uprising; even at the level of illegitimate violence, Aramburu failed to properly execute his victims. The official newspaper account published the day following the shootings listed the name of Juan Carlos Livraga among those dead. He was officially dead for the symbolic—patently artificial—organization of society under the leadership of Aramburu. But his body, although battered and violated, kept breathing as a single living organism. Falling through a crack opened between the social symbolic grid and

actual organic death, Livraga's body fits squarely into the space of the *undead*. In Livraga's body, Walsh contemplates natural history.

From a human vantage point, the contemplation of the objects that populate the realm of natural history, according to Benjamin, is likely to stir a melancholic disposition in the observer. This affective disposition is a result of the perception of the uncanny material shadow that human existence projects when pushed beyond the limits of symbolic organization and actual organic life; this material shadow—the *creaturely*—is what Walsh saw floating in Juan Carlos Livraga's eyes. The *creaturely* expresses itself through a fractured language, one that is made up of powerful sensorial stimuli that cannot be completely processed by the consciousness of the melancholic observer, and therefore it carries a remainder of unintelligibility that resists interpretation.

Although Santner does not elaborate it in these terms, one can read this nugget of opacity of the *creaturely* in the same psychic register as shock, which is after all an arrest of consciousness by an excess of energy in the form of sensorial information that escapes interpretation. Walsh reacted to the perception of this opacity of Livraga's face with puzzlement, which receded only when he resolved to take action. In his own account, Walsh wonders "No sé qué es lo que consigue atraerme en esa historia difusa, lejana, erizada de improbabilidades. No sé por qué pido hablar con ese hombre, por qué estoy hablando con Juan Carlos Livraga" (Walsh 19). "But then I know," he writes, not to preface a rational explanation to his own questions, but just to introduce the description of the face he is seeing in front of him. When Livraga tells his story, Walsh writes, "I believe it in the act." Thus, the writer moves from puzzlement to sensorial shock to a leap of faith, all the while bypassing rational elaboration; this is the path he follows to political mobilization.

It is not so much that the body of Livraga makes Walsh aware of the primordial organic existence that they share with other animals; rather, what the *creaturely* reveals

is the fact that such animality is the locus for the insertion of the political into contemporary human experience, and it is precisely this “biopolitical *animation* that distinguishes the human from the animal” (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 39). *Operación masacre*, as an account of the bodily manifestations of the excesses of political power, is a novel journalistic investigation into the realm of natural history.

Natural history, as Benjamin understands it, thus points to a fundamental feature of human life, namely that the symbolic forms in and through which this life is structured can be hollowed out, lose their vitality, break up into a series of enigmatic signifiers, “hieroglyphs” that in some way continue to address us—get under our psychic skin—though we no longer possess the key to their meaning. For Benjamin, natural history ultimately names the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning, cycles that are, for him . . . always connected to violence (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 17).

The fractured language of the *creaturely* reaches Walsh in a moment of shock and confusion; later, it gets under his skin, so to speak, mobilizing the *creaturely* in him as well, which is to say that it provides the basis for his political animation. As remarkable as the story of the rising of an individual’s political consciousness can be, the truly extraordinary fact about Walsh’s text is that (through its use of the image) it transfers the nugget of opacity that makes it creaturely onto his contemporary readers in such an effective way that it sparks a generational embrace of militancy. The effectiveness of such transference rests in the centrality of the image and the mixture of melancholic contemplation and shame that it stirs in the reader. Always at the hour of the *creaturely*, shame arises in response to the uncanny sight of the locus of our vulnerability: our flesh. For Santner “[S]hame pertains not merely to the body but to an uncanny, somehow material, excess experienced as both intimate and foreign to oneself . . .” (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 23), and just as much becomes clear in

the passage where Walsh relates the testimony of Livraga in front of a judge. With the author already on his side, the “talking dead” repeats his story for a third party who is nothing less than a representative of the law, provoking a strange effect close to skepticism for a moment, just to recover its persuasive force at the end thanks to a shared experience of shame in which the judge partakes.

The experience of seeing the violated body is the most powerful argument, which ultimately manages to convince the judge as it previously had convinced Walsh; this passage records the appearance of the martyr of the Peronist left. Scatological and eschatological is Livraga’s body *qua* political relic; from the force of this image, the armed branch of the Peronist left—the *montoneros* organization—would derive its foundational truth.

Having the *creaturely* as its field of manifestation, the dimension of the political in *Operación masacre* is registered by a rhetoric of animality. Following a couple of days of treatment at a public hospital, Juan Carlos Livraga is located by the police, re arrested and thrown in a bare jail cell to see if he would die from his wounds thus freeing the state from the shameful concatenation of errors that led to his current state. When Walsh narrates this passage he calls Livraga “el leproso de la Revolución Libertadora.” Then, the narration continues, a guard takes pity on the wretched man and throws over him a blanket previously used by the jail pet dog, so Walsh now calls him “el perro leproso de la Revolución Libertadora.” The same animalistic tone is used to describe the affect that mobilizes the anti-Peronist factions; Walsh reminds the reader about the rabid hatred that makes Aramburu’s regime forbid any mention of the name of Perón and it kidnaps and exiles the cadaver of Eva Perón. In describing his own change of perspective about Peronism, Walsh explains how in the process of researching *Operación masacre* he had come in contact for the first time with those “temibles seres,—los peronistas,” and with this image he continues the foreboding tone of animality.

Politics in mid-20th century Argentina seems inscribed mostly in the body of the political militant.

But what the case of *Operación masacre* adds to Santner's argument about the creaturely is that in the case of Rodolfo Walsh (and by extension, a whole generation of politicized contingents in Argentina), the shame brought about by the evidence of the creaturely in an instance of the violent assertion of the extralegal powers of the state does not merely congeal in melancholic contemplation. After the shock of his contact with the creaturely, Walsh improvises a strategy to intervene in the field of politics by establishing alliances with previously berated players: the Peronist left. This seems to suggest that the experience of confrontation with a wretched body is an effective gateway for a political mobilization based on the notion of a shared vulnerability: a politics of flesh and solidarity.

— 3 —

In the urban interventions by Artur Barrio from 1970, the direct confrontation with the rotting flesh inside the *trouxas ensangüentadas* (bloody bundles) produced an experience of shared vulnerability among the passersby. The bloody bundles intentionally rode a fine line between blunt display of organic animal matter (meat, blood, bones) and certain opacity as to the animal totality to which these fragmented materials belonged. What the bloody bundles informed clearly was that an animal had died and its remains had been packed into discreet scatologic units that betrayed human intervention; what they did not clarify was whether that animal was human or not, and which had been the circumstances leading to and following its death. The fact of the tortured, manipulated flesh was on display along the stream where Barrio placed the bundles,

without any contextualizing information that explained that basic fact of violence. The passersby reacted to the available sensorial stimuli, the sight and the smell of decaying animal remains under the early autumn sun, and were left to their own interpretative devices to process that information. The conclusions that they could have arrived at are in no way predictable, which was the intention of the artist, but without any authority figure present, any interpretation derived from the collective witnessing must have been reached through a horizontal exchange of impressions and ideas. This strategy took Barrio's intervention from the art world to the political arena.

Having lived under a dictatorship already for seven years by 1970, the Brazilian people saw a hardening in the social disposition of the government, one of which manifestations was the increasingly harsh repressive actions against dissidents and critics of the regime. Although the disappeared in Brazil never reached the numbers they had in Argentina or Chile, the intrusion of the hand of power into the bodies of the people was also used to assert the quavering legitimacy of the regime by clearly extra legal measures. Aside from the direct actions of the official authorities, there were the infamous Death Squads that raided the streets of Brazilian cities to execute petty criminals—who were usually young immigrants from the countryside forced to live on the streets. The Death Squads were constituted by off-duty policemen turned vigilantes, who forwent the legal procedures to rid the cities from incidents of petty robberies, drug-dealing, and rape. Grotesquely violent as the work of these groups was, they mostly went unpunished by the actual authority institutions, and even among the general population—mostly, the middle and upper classes—they found at least a partial approval. The bodies of the disappeared and of those massacred on the streets inhabited a largely unseen realm of the Brazilian social grid; they, like Juan Carlos Livraga, were *creaturely*, which is to say that they were the stuff of natural history.

When Barrio brought the material image of the tortured body out of the realm of invisibility and put it on display, the phantasmagoric presence of the disappeared and

the victims of the Death Squad was the backdrop to the collective impression that the bloody bundles made in their witnesses. As we saw before, the language of the *creaturely* is fractured and it is more effective in exciting the sensorium and breaching the protective layer of the psyche, than it is at yielding a rational interpretation of the sensorial stimulus. Barrio's bloody bundles were a sensorial provocation to the psyche of people in Belo Horizonte, but even if they were effective enough to startle and unsettle passersby, they did not completely render all contextual circumstances meaningless, as a traumatic incident would. In other words, the contact or immersion in the realm of the *creaturely* does not suppose a complete break with the symbolic system, which includes historical and political consciousness. So, the public who unknowingly attended Barrio's urban intervention was caught in a collective confluence of a manifestation of the *creaturely* and a shared historical political circumstance. One, almost indubitably, triggering an association with the other.

Eric Santner in his *The Royal Remains* (2011) argues that this confluence is the modern transposition of the relation between politics and the royal body in post-monarchical nations where sovereignty rests, supposedly, on the people's mandate. According to Santner, it is in the flesh of its citizens that modern forms of government exercise forms of violence aimed at legitimating their claim to power. Brazil, as the rest of Latin America, does not squarely fit the characterization of post-monarchical nation, and no doubt its past as a Portuguese colony—and temporary royal court from 1808 to 1821—makes it necessary to adapt the argument according to its specific historical circumstances. But it is still pertinent to revise the implications of the argument for the relation between the flesh of the people and the constitution of sovereign power. Quoting Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, Santner explains how the rule of power asserts itself in historical contexts similar to that of Brazil in 1970:

“At particular moments when there is within society a crisis of belief—that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has

ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation—the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty'" . . . This conception of the injured body as an unspeakable piece of the real that provides the ultimate support or backing of a symbolic order . . . (unconsciously) helps to make the social facts constituted within the space of representation feel real rather than fictional . . . What becomes painfully manifest in both war and torture "is the process by which a made world of culture acquires the characteristics of 'reality,' the process of perception that allows invented ideas, beliefs, and made objects to be accepted and entered into as though they had the same ontological status as the naturally given world" (Santner *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* xvi-xvii).

On the other hand, what Barrio's urban intervention can add to the argument is the observation of how the violent intervention of the power over the bodies functions as a legitimating political device only to the extent that its visual and otherwise material evidence is kept from the immediate reach of the people whom it pretends to persuade. This is the basic logic behind the systematic massive disappearances perpetrated by the de facto governments of the region during the 1970s. What circulated was a phantasmagorical (disembodied) rumor of known torture techniques and summary executions, but its legitimating effect was only sustained by the fact that there were no bodies carrying the marks of such violence. This allowed the sectors of the population who did not feel alluded by these acts of violence to justify the illegal use of force in the name of the preservation of stability and peace. Without the bodies or some figuration of their images, the only thing to circulate was ideology, discourse, which can be easily assumed or reject. The force of Barrio's piece is that it follows the exact opposite

strategy than the dictatorship: it shows the materiality of the tortured body without any ideological vehicle immediately attached to it.

Here of course, I am referring to actual urban intervention of the 20th of April, 1970, and not to the photographic and textual registers that exist of it. Even though Barrio also uses the space of the register to preserve a great deal of the fractured character of the sensorial experience of those involved in the primary display of the bloody bundles, what cannot be carried out by the disarticulated language or the instrumental photographs is the synesthetic experience of encountering a heap of meat, bones and blood on the street in broad daylight. In the artist's choice to avoid the (irremediably connoted) space of the museum we can find a pertinent way to explain the difference between two deceptively homonymous versions of aesthetics. Showing his pieces outside, on the street, Barrio consciously avoided the realm of aesthetics understood as the province of—in words of Susan Buck-Moss—"the philosophical trinity of Art, Beauty, and Truth," and instead opted for provoking a connection at the level of the sensorium between the public and the work of art, which coincides with a second understanding of aesthetics, which recovers the original Greek meaning. Buck-Morss defines the latter version of aesthetics in these terms:

Aisthitikos is the ancient Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthisis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. . . . It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus with its qualitatively autonomous, nonfungible sensors (the ears cannot smell, the mouth cannot see) is "out front" of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically, hence prior

not only to logic but to meaning as well. Of course all of the senses can be acculturated . . . [But they] maintain an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication. This is because their immediate purpose is to serve instinctual needs-for warmth, nourishment, safety, sociability-in short, they remain a part of the biological apparatus, indispensable to the self-preservation of both the individual and the social group (Buck-Morss "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered" 6).

The acculturation of which ideology is a central element cannot render the afferent perception apparatus ineffective. Regardless of their individual opinions on art, the dictatorship, the disappeared, and the Death Squads, the public of the bloody bundles had access to the contemplation of their own animality that natural history facilitates. This privileging of the body as the actual support of the work of art (as in the work performed by art, and not simply the object called artistic) is a constant in the production of Barrio. Even in the brief textual notes that accompany the photographic registers of the "situações," as he called his interventions, he tries to create fragmented evocations of sensorial stimuli rather than grammatically coherent sentences, or strictly logical explanations of the process of creation. Taking the text of the first part of three of the *Situação T / T, 1* as an example we can see the fractured grammar and the highlighting of what we can call "sensorial flashes."

SITUAÇÃO T/T, 1 . . . (1ªPARTE) 1- (DES) DOBRAMENTO DO CORPO
EM FUNÇÃO DO QUE SE VÊ SENDO FEITO . . . ÁREAMBIENTE . . .
2- PENETRAÇÃO DE UMA DAS MÃOS EM (N) + UMA PEQUENA
LUVA DE . . . BORRACHA . . . AMARELA . . . ESFORÇO . . . PRESSÃO .
. . DIFICULDADES . . . CIRCULATÓRIAS . . . 8 . . . 8 . . . 11- SONS . . .
SOM . . . SOM . . . 3- MANUSEIO DE CARNE EM ESTADO DE
DECOMPOSIÇÃO . . . INICIO . . . 10 . . . CHEIRO . . . MEMORIA . . .

TEMPO . . . FUMAÇA . . . OLFATO . . . 4- ABRIL . . . 1970 . . . BARRIO.
 10- . . . 8- . . . LI . . . BERD . . . ADE . . . 5- ETC. . . . 7- IDÉIAS . . .
 ELÉTRICAS . . . 8- SUORCHEIROSENSAÇÃO . . . ROUPAPEL . . .
 PELSOBREPEL . . . ESFREGANDOROÇANDO . . . PELOCOMPELO . . .
 (Barrio de Sousa Lopes *Regist(R)Os* = *Records* 96).

The body comes in contact with the world through the senses, the body makes it evident that itself is part of the world through the aesthetic work, that is, through the energy exchanges between the inside and outside of the human body. In Barrio's text there is a sustained trope of contact: the hand pressed and sweating inside the plastic glove, the handling of decomposing meat, clothes and skin in contact, skin on skin, hair on hair. The trope continues the next day when people come in contact with the bloody bundles, and with the bodies of the other people, as they are transformed into a collective by virtue of the amount of sensorial intensity created by the whole situation. In this effect resides the political force of Barrio's piece. He uses art, to go back to Buck-Morss argument about aesthetics, as a device to address the body and reinsert the afferent apparatus in the realm of social and political economy. Being in the presence of the material evidence of tortured flesh undoes the alienation sought by the dictatorship and makes it all the more difficult to stand passively in agreement with the violence that seeks to legitimate the dictatorship.

— 4 —

Rubem Fonseca and Guadalupe Nettel offer a different perspective of the political mobilization derived from an instance of sensorial shock compared to Rodolfo Walsh or Artur Barrio. The main distinctions can be appreciated in the general discursive

strategy, which may be explained by the fact that “A arte de andar nas ruas de Rio de Janeiro” and *El huésped*—works of literature—have a different claim to reality than a journalist investigation of a massacre or an urban intervention. There is a symbolic, metaphorical sieve that must be taken into account in the evaluation of the political effectiveness that these works can achieve. In other words, they will be only as effective in mobilizing a political action as any other literary text whose relation with reality is mediated by disavowal of faithfulness to “what really happened.” But what is relevant in the context of this project is to notice the continuity that they offer to the pattern discerned in Walsh’s and Barrio’s work, that is to say that these literary texts insist on the connection of sensorial shock, improvisation, and a disarticulation of the original subjective disposition, which can be understood as a powerful political mobilization.

Fonseca’s story about Augusto–Epifânio begins with a reflection on the labor of the literary writer. This first textual move—literature writing about literature—establishes a narcissistic motif that can be read throughout the entire narration. Epifânio, who change his name to Augusto, is presented as a retired bureaucrat with a dream of writing a book about the city that he loves: Rio de Janeiro. He did not want to tackle this project while working for the municipal sewage department because that job filled his mind with scatological preoccupations, so no space was left for the demanding mistress that a friend of Augusto described literature as. Once retired, the protagonist begins researching the city to write a guide to the city unlike any other; this guide would serve no touristic purpose, but would reveal the character of the urban grid as it is experienced by those who walked its streets. The chosen neighborhood to begin this quest is *o centro* (the center, or downtown), which occupies an interesting symbolic space in the configuration of the city of Rio de Janeiro: it contains institutions of government and finance that are central to the proper functioning of the cities, but after the working day is done, *o centro* is emptied out of “suits” and only the more marginalized inhabitants remain. Beggars, small-time vandals, and prostitutes

constitute the population with whom Augusto comes in contact while doing his research.

The narration follows the protagonist throughout the streets of a city that, in fact, would be hard to find in the glossy pages of a tourist guide, but the stated purpose of Augusto to write loses relevance in favor of a seemingly random collection of encounters that piece together a horizontal, necessarily confusing map of the city. The reader never has access to the text that Augusto is said to work on ceaselessly after his nightly promenades. Furthermore, the narration never moves to any other place of the city besides the center. This exclusion of the south zone of the city, the Corcovado hill, the Sugarloaf, the beaches, the Botanical Garden, and other known touristic views expresses a resistance to the image of Rio de Janeiro as *a cidade maravilhosa*—the marvelous city—that promises to take the breath of its visitors' away. Extremely photogenic from atop its most famous hills, the city of Rio is to be taken in from above, registering the orographic texture, the different neighborhoods, and the architectural furnishing of the beaches, parks, and lagoons from a distance that ties all the different parts together in one single image. The Rio de Janeiro of the tourist advertisements looks at itself from above, enchanting itself with its own exuberance, desiring itself as that fantastic image at the bottom of the hill. Rio de Janeiro holds its image in a narcissistic projection, as it tries to convince itself of its marvelousness. This Rio is nowhere in Fonseca's text.

To the vertical narcissistic urban gaze, Augusto opposes a mapping of the city that can only be drawn from a horizontal perspective: the map of *o andarinho*, the promenader. And the center of Rio de Janeiro, the first neighborhood to be mapped out, is the one place in the city that resists the narcissist self-contemplation. So instead of the phantasmagoric image of completeness, this horizontal map is a collection of sensorial cues that evoke the experience of inhabiting a fractured space in the heart of the city. This open space, which is central and marginal at the same time, gives

Augusto access to the realm of the *creaturely*. Downtown Rio is the open space of the undead, where the city shows itself as a sick mother in whom the generative and excretory functions have become simultaneous and undifferentiated, suspended midway outside the functional symbolic system and the organic human life.

The most visible manifestation of the creaturely in this story is the image of the beggars who want to turn themselves into human piles of garbage to interrupt the false sense of harmony and properness that the middle and upper classes experience when they are out and about in the city. Just like Barrio's bloody bundles, the beggars union led by Zê Galinha, want to pepper the streets with sensorial provocations that would jolt the passersby out of their self-complacency. And even if they failed in doing this in the precise way they imagined it, they have already succeeded in operating a change in the subjective disposition of Augusto–Epifânio, who by the end of the narration has shifted his main interest from writing his book to directly witnessing the city. The encounter with the leader of the beggars seems to be the high point of the story, when the literacy-imparting protagonist finds a sector of the population that already have a mastery of the language, which would have been the only contribution of Augusto to them; because they know how to read they are politically mobilized in ways that lead them to intervene in the social terrain in a way that he has never attempted. The misanthropy of the beggars expresses more directly on the source of their hatred, unlike Augusto's, which up until this point found in literary production its only outlet. In that encounter he witnessed for the first time during his research the allusion to the life of the collective with self-awareness to spare; he had intended to establish a communion with the city, but all his human connections were inscribed in the register of the individual relationships. The last scene finds the protagonist reaching the shore at the end of his usual nightly walk and instead of returning to write as he does without exception, he chooses to stay with the briny smell of the port, of the city. He has moved from the self-referential labor of solitary writing, to a creaturely connection to the city.

Ana, the protagonist of *El huésped*, has a clear connection to the world of the undead; she has a direct line to the *creaturely* living inside her. Similarly to Fonseca's short story, Nettel's novel establishes a rhetoric of sensorial interruptions and reconfigurations. In "A arte..." sight as the vehicle for a narcissist figuration of urban completeness is blocked in Downtown, which lacking a hill atop from which to stare down, can only be seen from a necessarily fractured and partial horizontal perspective. For Ana, the idea of being inhabited by a beastly doppelgänger carries the conviction that the day will come when she relinquishes the control of their shared existence to the hands of *La Cosa*, which happens to be blind. From early on in the narration, the protagonist establishes a sensorial and affective division between her and her other. To the one belonged the sight, the memory, and the love of the brother; to the other, blindness, memory-cancelling animality, and boundless libidinal energy.

But despite having memory of *La Cosa* from the moment her consciousness awoke, their cohabitation had not proved terribly problematic until the morning when Ana's relation to her brother was irremediably fractured. In that fateful occasion, Ana explains, *La Cosa* found a way of making itself visible through their eyes. That irruption of the creaturely in the middle of the shared quotidian intimacy between the siblings proved so traumatic that the girl assumes that the affective ties with her brother have been irremediably severed. Her boundless libidinal energy was exposed for a moment in the presence of the object of her incestuous desire through her eye, so Ana's response is an intense guilt that exacerbates the fear of blindness, which is evidently a form of castration. Sight should be punished as the locus of forbidden desire.

For a long time, the protagonist tries to re-channel her libidinal energy in a solipsistic labor of memory construction, anticipating the day when she will go blind

and will not be able to create new visual memories. After this latency period, she finally seeks contact with the city and other people, only to find that the split urban structure replicates her psychic chasm and libidinal disposition. In the city, she sides with the *creaturely* realm of the blind and crippled who populate the subterranean grid of tunnels of the metro. Like the center of Rio in Fonseca's story, the subterranean galleries where Ana finds once again the opportunity for a human connection are not visually accessible. They are marked by an opacity that makes them propitiatory spaces where the *creaturely* manifests itself more powerfully, exciting the sensorium of the people who occupy them.

El Cacho guides Ana as a deformed Virgil throughout the realm of *La Cosa Urbana*, where the protagonist partially opens herself to affective attachments to the city and the people in El Cacho's group. When another girl from the collective dies and Ana flees the scene, shame closes in on her once again, making her decide to abandon the concrete political interventions that the group orchestrated. But she does not retreat to a solipsistic state this time. After she has a sexual encounter with El Cacho, she feels blindness finally overtaking her, and decides to live inside the metro for a long while. I commented before on the apparently ambiguous ending of the novel, but if we reconsider it in the light of Santner's argument about the political animation that takes place in the realm of the flesh—and which distinguishes the human animal from the rest—then we can read Ana's tranquil acceptance of her blindness not merely as the resigned gesture of a moralistic penitent who finds solace in punishment (since the mere existence of the punishment indicates that the forbidden pleasure has been attained), but as a definite shift in the subjective disposition of the protagonist.

Santner uses the image of the hunchback evoked by Benjamin while reading Kafka, to offer the quintessential example of the *creaturely*. He argues that

The creaturely life that Benjamin found everywhere in Kafka's work . . . is a by-product of exposure to what we might call the excitations of power,

those enigmatic bits of address and interpellation that disturb the social space—and bodies—of his protagonists.

In one of his many attempts at characterizing the process and effects of being rendered creaturely by such exposure, Benjamin focuses quite explicitly on the bodies of Kafka's figures, so many of whom are bent over, contracted, distorted . . . The prototype of the cringed body is, Benjamin suggests, a figure who appears nowhere in Kafka's work but haunts it nonetheless . . . the hunchback . . .

The image is crucial for Benjamin, for he also suggests that redemption can be understood as a passage through and beyond the creaturely life materialized in these cringed bodies (Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* 24-25).

The embracement of a life in blindness, in more raw contact with the rest of her senses, seems to unclog the flow of her libido, which is necessary to escape the alienation that guilt had produced in Ana during her late childhood. Having experienced her own perceived physical abnormality more freely being among, and literally rubbing elbows against, other deformed marginals, Ana has probably found that elusive "passage through and beyond creaturely life materialized in these cringed bodies."

CHAPTER 3: WASTELANDS

José Revueltas' *El luto humano*

— 1 —

Mexican literary tradition has a number of sources due to its particular history: Three centuries as a Spanish colony and two more as an independent country have not been able to erase the trace of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cosmogony, whose structure and logic are still at work in the narration of history in contemporary Mexico.

Mayan and Nahuatl mythologies survive in the particular assimilation of Christianity that took place in the Spanish colonies at the end of the fifteenth century. Pre-Columbian narratives found useful correspondences in the imaginary of the faith the missionaries spread among the Indians, lodging the seed of an indigenous world view in the fertile center of Christian cosmogony. One such correspondence between the pre-Columbian and Spanish Christian is especially pertinent in discussing the image of the land, *la tierra*, in José Revueltas' *El luto humano*, namely, the apocalyptic perspective of history.

The myth of the "suns" (divine epochs that humanity has gone through to arrive at its current state) is present in both the Nahuatl epic narratives of the codices interpreted by Ángel María Garibay and in the Mayan book, *Popol Vuh*. These two traditions relate the story of the origins of the world in similar fashion: The gods started to populate the earth with people made out of different materials, and for each new material, there was a corresponding problem that doomed each human race to a short-lived existence. In each new "sun," the newly created men and women altered the precarious balance of their environment, abusing it to the point of collapse; seeing this, the gods accepted the failure of the "sun," cancelled that cycle of life through the advent of some definite cataclysm (a deluge or a great fire), and began a new cycle of creation.

This narrative structure of the cancellation and new beginning of consecutive eras of human existence found its match in the Christian tradition of the Apocalypse as the promised end of the current era of human existence, one that will be cancelled by the second coming of the son of god and the final judgment, after which all souls can move on to the realm of eternal existence. The Book of Revelation, introduced to Mesoamerica by the Franciscans and Dominicans, was compatible with the notion of the end of a “sun,” thus persisting in the mestizo imaginary of post-colonial Mexico.

The Mexican twentieth century opened with a revolution. Political discontent had been festering for several decades both in the indigenous *campo* and in the urban upper classes. Every faction had its reasons to depose Porfirio Díaz and end his overextended tyranny. The Revolution of 1910 was the first great popular revolution of the twentieth century, and it was itself a cataclysm that successfully abolished the logic of an era; but it was less assertive and effective in building the edifice of the new time it was supposed to usher in. The reverberations of the violence that broke out on November 20th, 1910, continued to affect the country, especially the lives of the peasants, for several decades. The Porfiriato and the system of the *latifundia* were not ended by a great fire or a deluge—as would happen in the Nahuatl epic or *Popol Vuh*—but, in Revueltas’ novel, by a flood, the central metaphor to indicate the apocalyptic cancellation of yet another era in Mexican recent history: the time of *la tierra*.

The narration of the novel opens with the image of a catastrophe of personal dimensions: the death of the girl Chonita, which is connected to another dimension of collective character. The family of the dead girl is part of a decaying rural community that comprises a handful of families who refused to leave their drought-stricken land a few years before when a generalized exodus began. The long-awaited rain comes at last, and when it does, it floods the town, showing how devastatingly cruel the other extreme can be. Even though the town had declined when the river dried up, this last

catastrophe—the river bursting its banks, causing a flash flood—is the final blow that forces the last of the families to abandon the place.

El luto humano is a reflection on death as a constant in Mexican history, elevated to the level of a symbol for the times that came in the wake of the Revolution. The mourning of the title comes after the cancellation of a time in Mexican history when *la tierra* was central to the new idea of the nation that revolutionary efforts sought to bring about—particularly those of the agrarian faction represented by Villa in the North and Zapata in the South.

— 2 —

Even more than a theme or trope, death is the dorsal spine of *El luto humano*'s narrative structure and plot, permeating the characters, story, and landscape. The novel opens with its first image of death: The girl Chonita is lying down, feverish, wheezing, and unconscious, surrounded by Cecilia and Úrsulo, mother and father lost in a haze of grief and an atavistic sense of fatality. Úrsulo witnesses the agony of his daughter as he reflects on the temporality of death, “porque la muerte no es morir, sino lo anterior al morir, lo inmediatamente anterior, cuando aún no entra en el cuerpo y está, inmóvil y blanca, negra, violeta, cárdena, sentada en la más próxima silla” (Revueltas 12).

Thus, death does not come after the last exhalation, but with the certainty and inevitability of its advent. It is not a corporeal event, but a psychical one, or in a case as extreme as that of this decaying community, it is an overwhelming and ever-present perspective that tinges all. Not only does death open and close Revueltas' story; it is also the constant that occupies the memory of the characters and obsesses the gaze of the omniscient narrator. Death is the quasi-tangible presence in the moment

immediately prior to its overtaking of human life that communicates through the signs of its inevitability. This manifests itself as a silent standstill, a suspension of time in which past, present, and future form a revelatory continuum occupied through and through by the image of what is about to collapse. The central image that concerns this analysis *El luto humano* is the revolutionary land in the instant immediately prior to its collapse.

The ominous tone of damnation that runs through the narration is defined in unambiguous terms when Úrsulo choses to stay by his daughter's side in her final hour. He is almost entranced by the image of death sitting in the room, displaying all its mortuary colors. Only after the girl's last breath is he willing to go across the river, with the help of his enemy Adán, to fetch the priest for Chonita. Death seemed to be always accompanied by a priest:

Siempre un cura a la hora de la muerte. Un cura que extrae el corazón del pecho con ese puñal de piedra de la penitencia, para ofrecerlo, como antes los viejos sacerdotes en la piedra de los sacrificios, a Dios, a Dios en cuyo seno se pulverizaron los ídolos esparciendo su tierra, impalpable ahora en el cuerpo blanco de la divinidad" (Revueltas 12).⁶⁵

But the girl Chonita dies outside of the godly gaze that the priest channels. For Cecilia this means that her daughter's soul has been left to wander, that this soul is eternally lost without the propitiatory presence—at once Catholic and pre-Columbian—that would turn the inert little bundle of flesh and bones into a sacrificial victim whose life could be offered to the divine in exchange for the possibility of a future for the community.

⁶⁵ Always a priest at the hour of death. A priest who cuts out the heart from the chest with that stone knife of penitence, to offer it, as did the ancient priests on the sacrificial stone, to God, to God in whose bosom the idols had been pulverized and their earth scattered, imperceptible now in the white body of divinity.

In the mid-1930s, history's verdict on the Mexican Revolution was still uncertain. Although Porfirio Díaz had been deposed with relative ease, this was only one of the goals of the struggle; after it was attained, plans for the new national project seemed to point in as many contradictory directions as there were conflicting factions. The urban bourgeois base led by Francisco I. Madero saw their main concern as the return to a democratic regime that forbade re-elections. Madero embraced the demands of the peasantry, too, at the dawn of the armed conflict (to gain a broader base) but the ultimate goals of redistributing expropriated land were relegated and then violently repressed by the many subsequent revolutionary governments, which took aim at the agrarian factions represented by Villa and Zapata.

The moment portrayed in Revueltas' novel is the end of the 1930s, after the failed attempt by the government that still bore the sign of the revolution to attend to its promise of redistribution and the rehabilitation of the land. *El luto humano* is the story of this post-revolutionary period and the trace of this failure in the fate of a peasant community. It is the story of the demise of the last members of that community, those who resolve to stay even after the general exodus that followed the failure of a governmental project to construct a dam to ensure the constant availability of water for crops. This is the story of a town and its river and of the peasants and their relationships, which are traversed by desire and politics.

The plot is divided into two moments. The first one, which opens with the death of Chonita, sets up the temporal continuum that connects past, present, and future at a standstill in which the characters are reduced to witnessing their own deaths and that coincides with the collapse of the revolutionary promise embedded in the land they refuse to leave. The second moment is the evocation of the image of the town and the land as it has been during the years of the construction of the dam, and as it was after the government engineers and hopeful peasants abandoned the failed experiment. There is no opening to the future in this second moment, at least not one that entails a

continuation of the evoked image of the land. The town, with its river and its inhabitants, belongs to the revolutionary period that, just like other mythical “suns” before it, ended with a cataclysm. The difference between Revueltas’ text and the Náhuatl and Quiché mythologies is the absence in the modern novel of the divine gaze to witness the end and dictate a new beginning. Caught between two narrative traditions of collapse in which divine judgment dictates the fate of the human, Revueltas takes a decidedly terrestrial course in which redemption of the land will not be granted from above. If at all possible, the redemption of the Revolution will have to come from the reactivation of its subterranean utopian remnants, by purely human means.

— 3 —

When Úrsulo leaves his house to look for the priest, the private misery of his daughter’s passing is amplified by the devastating storm that is taking over the town. The language of the narrator deepens the sense of doom, and all the characters share this atavistic melange of resentment, suspicion, and a deep-seated fatalism. The temporality of death and doom extends to remote historical moments, with copious references to pre-Columbian mythology; it includes the present day of the narration when the lives of the whole community advance hastily towards death, and facing the future offers nothing more than the dark slate of the sky in the middle of a storm.

Úrsulo, lost in the storm, unable to find the river, disoriented by strong gusts of wind, knocks at Adán’s door. Adán, the narrator explains, is Úrsulo’s enemy, and both men alternately plan the other’s murder and fear death at the hand of the other. The description of each of the characters serves the narrator in enriching the communal

portrait of the little town, and by extension, the national character. Adán, for instance, is a known murderer, and a polar force in the dynamics of power in the novel; but just as important as his particular description, is the commentary the text offers about the people who interact with Adán displaying a homogenous collective reaction attributed to such an elusive subject as “la gente.”

“Dice la gente que debe más de cinco muertes.” Y quién sabe por qué el más, pues a lo mejor sólo a cinco había matado. Pero la gente era una gente humillada desde hacía muchos años y muchos siglos; humillada desde su nacimiento, y la palabra más era tan solo para indicar que el criminal—o los criminales de siempre—seguirían matando. “Más de cinco.” Más. Más. Fatalidad pura, resignación triste y antigua, donde una apatía interior, atenta, inevitable y desolada, esperaba, sin oponerse, crímenes nuevos, más y más difuntos (19).⁶⁶

Echoing the assessment of other intellectuals who write on Mexican identity—Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea, and Octavio Paz among them—Revueltas writes the collective character of the Mexican peasant as a creature raised in the apathy and distrust left behind by the long concatenation of defeats that make up his collective experience. According to this portrait, fatality is the corollary of perennial humiliation and the constant foreboding of death. These characters do not anticipate redemption by divine decree; their subjectivity is devised around a fundamental dispossession, and on their horizon lies only the reiteration of a violent cycle.

The Revolution, in this account, speaks directly to that dark kernel of dispossession: “Tierra y libertad,” the agrarian revolutionaries demanded, and at the end of the armed struggle and the announced triumph of the revolutionary project, the

⁶⁶ “The people say that he owes more than five deaths.” And who knows why they say “*more* than five” when it was possible that he had killed only five. But they had been a humiliated people from birth; and the word *more* simply indicated that the criminal—or the usual criminals—would continue to kill. “*More* than five.” *More. More.* Pure fatalism, sad and ancient resignation, where an internal, obedient apathy, inevitable and disconsolate, awaited new crimes and more and more dead victims without resisting.

possession of the land by its workers proved difficult to accomplish. It happened only partially and with the proverbial inefficiency of an inexperienced bureaucratic system. The agrarian demand stirred precisely that dark kernel of dispossession in the mobilized peasants who participated in the armed struggle. Adán, the primordial father, but also the mortal enemy, understands the revolution only in these baleful terms.

Él no podía decir nada de la revolución, que era apenas un desorden y un juego sangriento. La guerra, a lo sumo, una manera de buscar la sangre, de satisfacerla, y carecía de cuerpo y de propósitos, tal vez únicamente los de ejercitar los resortes secretos del hombre, sus celos, sus resentimientos, su extraordinaria y sorprendente barbarie, su carencia de todo. Se sentía el hombre dentro de la revolución como si se volviese a encontrar a sí mismo, como si ya todo eso—la muerte, la sangre, la libertad de transgredir—fueran la esencia y el programa (152)F

After decades of violence failed to bring about the promised resolution, dispossession shaped the temperament of a whole class, turning into a disorienting hatred whose borders were not easily determined and which seemed to confer on Revueltas' peasant collective character a formidable, inscrutable force. A black river of hatred runs through Revueltas' novel; it is sometimes enlarged by hyperbole, as in this passage, where it stands for an important component of national identity. But we see it also as a fundamental component of the plot; this is, after all, the story of a town and the river that brings life or death, prosperity or devastation, and more frequently the former than the latter. Úrsulo, aided by his enemy Adán, must cross the proverbial river to bridge the chasm between redemption and damnation by calling on the priest to bless the body of Chonita. The river that usually ran as a thin, useless stream, whose girth had always been intimately connected to the prosperity of the town, was now about to burst its banks, overwhelmed by the fury of the storm. Adán dies on the way back, not by the

cruelty of the water, but by the undercurrent of hatred that not even the priest escaped. During the Guerra Cristera, Adán had tortured and killed two cristeros of the priest's church, and in the throes of the violent chaos of the storm, the hatred of old broke the walls of contention of the bitter, disenchanted priest, and he exacts his vengeance. He kills Adán in the propitiatory presence of the river, when the sight of his enemy's neck, vulnerable and proximate, had awoken the festering hatred that he kept for a man who, until that moment, he only knew by name and deed. This hatred is a force that emanates from trampled hope and aimless patience and is incalculable until it manifests itself as a cataclysmic tide.

Aquello descomunal, todo aquello insensato y extraviado, la inútil sangre, la fiereza, el odio, el río sucio a mitad del país, negro, con saliva, la serpiente reptando, ¿qué era? ¿Qué misterio? ¿Qué pueblo asombroso, qué pueblo espantoso? Solo podía explicarse por la desposesión radical y terminante de que había sido objeto el hombre, que si defendía a Dios era porque en él defendía la vaga, temblorosa, empavorecida noción de sentirse dueño de algo, dueño de Dios, dueño de la Iglesia, dueño de las piedras, de algo que jamás había poseído, la tierra, la verdad, la luz o quién sabe qué, magnífico y poderoso (172).⁶⁷

Land, truth, and illumination have always eluded this small peasant community that braves the apocalyptic storm, mourning not only a premature death but their own long-awaited demise. Even Úrsulo, who after the Revolution was, at last, the owner of Cecilia and his fifteen hectares, and Cecilia (who once knew love and passion) saw their possessions wither away. By the time they find themselves reunited in front of their

⁶⁷ It was all so incredible, so senseless and insane: the useless blood, the ferocity, the hatred, the filthy river black with saliva in the middle of the country, the creeping serpent, what did it all mean? What was the mystery? Who were these amazing, terrifying people? These questions could only be answered by the radical and definitive dispossession man had been forced to endure, and if he therefore defended God, it was because in God he was defending the vague, trembling, terrifying notion of feeling himself master of something, master of God, master of the Church, master of stones, of what he never possessed: land, truth, light, or who knows what other magnificent, powerful thing.

dead daughter, who has been posthumously anointed by the murderous priest, the couple, surrounded by their last remaining neighbors, sense the certainty of their imminent collective death as a tangible presence, as real as the overflowed river and so undeniable that its truth need not be formulated in words. These are characters who have been historically denied what they need, and thus they have developed a profound capacity for silent rumination and enough awareness to understand the catastrophe that closes down on them.

No desperate gestures to reach an impossible salvation are attempted. La Calixta, one of the neighbors, crazed by a primordial fear that overcomes her while listening to the sounds of the storm, runs out into the night and disappears. Jerónimo, another neighbor, lies in a drunken stupor on the dirt floor as the water starts to rise, and he barely regains consciousness before finally drifting into death. The guilt-ridden priest abandons the brief procession of survivors, and shortly after they decide to walk away aimlessly, he lets himself be swept under or swept away by the same river that witnessed his deadly sin. The remaining few—Úrsulo, Cecilia, Calixto and Marcela—walk on, carrying Chonita's little body, until after what seems like an eternity stretched out by the difficulties that the rising river offers, they come up against the walls of Úrsulo's house and discover solid evidence of the futility of their effort: They have been walking in circles. They all climb to the roof and stay there, suspended in that stretched out moment previous to expiring, in the haze of the certainty and inevitability of their death. "Nadie dijo una palabra. Un silencio envolvió todo, mientras Úrsulo y Calixto con la cabeza baja, hundíanse en una tristeza mortal y definitiva" (90).

This is the quintessential apocalyptic moment of suspension, the silent void opened between the order that comes to an end and whatever lies on the other side of the final catastrophe. It is, after all, a moment of strange perfection (in the sense of something being "brought to completion," since no further change is foreseeable), a

space of vacuum where the complete image of that which is ending is revealed in the previous instant of its definite collapse.

Se abandona la vida y un sentimiento indefinible de resignación ansiosa impulsa a mirar todo con ojos detenidos y fervientes, y cobran las cosas su humanidad y un calor de pasos, de huellas habitadas. No está solo el mundo, sino que lo ocupa el hombre. Tiene sentido su extensión y cuanto la cubre, las estrellas, los animales, el árbol... Se abandona la vida y una esperanza, un júbilo secreto dice palabras, nociones universales: esto de hoy, la muerte, una eternidad... Existo y me lo comunican mi cuerpo y mi espíritu, que van a dejar de existir; he participado en el milagro indecible, he pertenecido. Fui parte y factor, y el vivir me otorgó una dignidad inmaculada, semejante a la que puede tener la estrella, el mar o la nebulosa. Si tarde lo entiendo, este minuto en que se me ha revelado es lo más solemne, lo más grande; inclino la cabeza sobre mi pecho: mi corazón es una bandera purísima (91).⁶⁸

This transcendental evocation of meaning and order is immediately followed by a description of the *zopilotes* (Mexican vultures) circling lower each time, attracted by the smell of Chonita's flesh decaying now that the four survivors have been perched on the roof for three days. The transcendent revelations that occupy the mind of the characters are not incompatible with the crude scatological reminder of their own putrefaction.

Transcendental and utterly material, is, thus, the image of the time of the revolutionary

⁶⁸ Life surrenders and an indefinable feeling of anxious resignation impels one to look at everything with careful, fervent eyes, and things begin to take on their humanity and a warmth of steps, inhabited footprints. The world is not alone; rather, man dwells on it. Its vastness, and all the land it covers, the stars, animals, trees, it all makes sense . . . Life finally surrenders and a hope, a secret exultation utters words, universal notions: the situation today, death, and eternity. I exist and this fact is communicated to me by my body and my spirit, both of which are about to cease to exist; I have participated in the unspeakable miracle, I have belonged. I was a part and a factor, and life has given me an immaculate dignity, similar to what stars, seas, or clouds might have. Although I am late in realizing this, this minute in which it has been revealed to me is the greatest and most solemn of my life. I lean my head on my chest; my heart is the purest of flags.

land that unravels: The peasants see the *zopilotes* coveting their material remains, the vultures waiting for them all to die. The river runs black and menacing, singing its monotonous fury, asserting the language of dispossession that now describes the landscape, too. And the four survivors remember “todo aquello querido, tenebroso, alto, noble y siniestro que era la revolución” (145).⁶⁹

— 4 —

Dispossession obnubilates the subtler registers of tenderness and love that can also be traced in *El luto humano*. This affective inflection, however, can only be read in the elaborations of the extradiegetic narrator, as the actions of the characters and the relationships among them are frequently reduced to displays of cruelty or an all-consuming desperation for possession. Desire, for example, is often described among these characters as a dynamic of forceful demand, resistance, surrender, and resentment.

Para Úrsulo, Cecilia era fieramente suya, como si se tratara de algo a vida o muerte. Suya como su propia sangre o como su propia cabeza o como las plantas de sus pies. La quería cual un desposeído perpetuo, sin tierra y sin pan: cual un árbol desnudo y pobre. Amor de árbol, de cacto, de mortal trepadora sedienta (41).⁷⁰

But tenderness and love, regardless of how muffled or ruffled, act as counterbalance to apocalyptic obfuscation in *Revueltas'* assessment of Mexican character. And this is

⁶⁹ “All that beloved, dark, high, noble and sinister thing that was the revolution”

⁷⁰ For Úrsulo, Cecilia was savagely his, as if it were a matter of life or death. His like his own blood or his own head or the soles of his feet. He loved her as if he were someone perpetually dispossessed, landless and breadless; as if he were a fragile, barren tree. The love of a tree, of a cactus, of a thirsty, mortal vine.

precisely where Revueltas separates himself from Octavio Paz, for example. Both authors share the overwhelmingly dark outlook of the mid-twentieth century Mexican, still largely determined by the pre-colonial imaginary and adverse historical circumstances—for Paz, the Mexican is the product of a foundational rape, while for Revueltas the ultimate explanation of this character is absolute dispossession. They also share the provision of a space of relief, a sort of vanishing point of resolution—the name of this prescription for Paz is *humanism*; for Revueltas, it is *revolution*. Where they differ is in the affect they instill in their accounts of the national character. Paz's quest for objectivity translates textually into a descriptive cruelty whose enjoyment seems to come from the reduction of its object to unsalvageable, unlovable dregs capable only of repeating a single pathetic note afforded by a monolithic national essence. Revueltas seeks no objective perspective, and the enjoyment of the narrative voice in *El luto humano* is more nuanced than Paz's; there is no shortage of hyperbole in the description of the dark kernel of dispossession and its manifestations, but the narrator comes back time and again to think the difficult grace of the promise of redemption that the Revolution meant for the Mexican peasant. Unlike Paz's prescribed, lofty, condescending, intellectual elitism, Revueltas' revolutionary promise is immanent and tangible, well within the scope of the experiences already possessed by his Mexican peasant characters.

¡Encontrar la revolución! Como si la revolución fuese una persona, una mujer, y se la buscase tangible, física, delimitada... [A]quella frase que encerraba de pronto cierta profundidad y cierta sustancia nueva: encontrar la revolución, ir, tomarle la mano, unírsele tan verdaderamente que de ella pudieran nacer los hijos, las casas, la tierra, el cielo, la patria nueva (152).⁷¹

⁷¹ "Find the revolution!" As if the revolution were a person, a woman, and she, tangible, physical, and defined were being sought . . . [The phrase had] suddenly assumed a certain profundity and a

This fertile revolution that can yield sons, homes, the land, and sky—in other words, a new fatherland—is, however, the province of only a few. In *El luto humano*, the one who best embraced this vision was Natividad, the character who most clearly represents the revolutionary ideal in the novel. The arrival of Natividad to the little town altered its fate in ways both very private—he was Cecilia’s first lover—and very political or collective—he organized the workers who were building a dam to go on strike demanding better labor conditions. Described as frank, virile, and clear-minded, Natividad stands for the noblest version of a continuous revolution that insisted on acting on current material conditions to help bring about the fruits that the armed struggle promised.

No trace of resentment or noxious sequels of dispossession can be found in Natividad. His language is that of absolute, simple, immanent love that embraces people and the land as an organic unity. “Para Natividad como que la vida era enormemente rica, fértil y cualquiera de sus detalles, aun los mínimos, como encerrando un universo lleno de pasión” (131-132).⁷² Passionate curiosity untouched by dispossession is the clearest mark of Natividad’s foreignness. Not only does he come from another place, but from a different assimilation of the experience of the revolution, one whose fruit is not the pillaged fortunes nor the meager fifteen hectares that the agrarian reform granted to small producers. The fruit of the revolution for Natividad is the perspective that it afforded, the resolute disposition of those who know themselves to be direct participants in the political life of the country.

There is, however, something phantasmagoric in the character of Natividad, some lack of concreteness in his figure as it is evoked purely by the memory that other characters keep. Cecilia, the lover, Adán the antithetical enemy and ultimately the

certain new value: “Find the revolution!” Go, take its hand, unite with it so intimately it would give birth to children, houses, land, heaven, the entire country.

⁷² For Natividad, life was enormously rich and fertile, and any of its details, even the slightest, contained a universe of passion.

murderer, and Úrsulo, the follower disoriented by feelings of admiration, love, and resentment—to all of them the arrival of Natividad means a major alteration of their subject-formation process. The disposition of their inner landscapes changes after their individual connections to Natividad exacerbates their desires or the sense they each had of lack and loss.

Natividad arrives in the small town during its time of prosperity, when the central government is invested in a federal project to build irrigation systems to aid those producers who still depend on seasonal cycles to grow their crops, and who had always been vulnerable to the whims of the weather. “El Sistema de Riego,” as it is called in the novel, is the haphazard attempt of a government to bring the advantages of technology to the countryside, which remained mostly associated with atavistic customs and pre-modern traditions in the national imagination. When the construction efforts supervised by Adán are well under way, Natividad arrives in the town for the first time, and these two antithetical characters meet on the dirt road as they ride and exchange opinions about the project, land, and the revolution.

El gobierno del centro, preocupado vivamente de imprimir a la reforma agraria un sentido moderno y avanzado, había establecido en el país diversas unidades de riego, en tierras expropiadas al latifundismo. Ríos de avenidas irregulares eran aprovechados para construir grandes represas donde se almacenaba el agua que se distribuía después, en forma racional, de acuerdo con las necesidades de los agricultores... De esta suerte el gobierno lograba una serie de objetivos: establecía con seria raigambre una mediana propiedad, sólida y conservadora; moderaba, con ello, los ímpetus extremistas de la revolución agraria y, al mismo tiempo, aparecía como un gobierno que no abandona sus principios y que aún es

capaz de inscribir en sus banderas aquel vandálico lema “Tierra y libertad” (132-133).⁷³

For a couple of years, the project was a success. A modernized agrarian reform conquered the inconstant water of the river, trapping it behind a cement curtain, which allowed it to be administered rationally, and the town flourished. Natividad sees in the construction of the dam not the Revolution realized, but a project in need of further work and commitment to maintain the revolutionary promise of the redemption of the land. Six months after Natividad—who during the Revolution had the role of medical assistant for the wounded and midwife for the *soldaderas*—arrives in town, a general strike is declared to demand better labor conditions for the *peones* (wage workers). Five thousand strong, the strike is a direct affront to the central government, which wants to maintain its revolutionary credentials with *El Sistema*. The strike is the first instance in *El luto humano* in which the peasant community is more and better than the sum of its collective dispossession.

Pues una huelga es aquello al margen del silencio, pero silencioso también. Los huelguistas callan, pero tienen una voz... Los hombres tienen otra voz y otra manera de caminar y otras miradas, y en el aire se siente algo poderoso que sube como una masa firme. Se trata del asombro. Existe una materia nutrida en la atmósfera, como si los corazones se congregaran para erigir muros de energía y algo fuese a ocurrir, eminente y primero (156).⁷⁴

⁷³ The central government, deeply worried about giving its Agrarian Reform program a modern and advanced face, had established in the country different irrigation units on the lands expropriated from the large estates. Rivers with irregular courses were used to construct large dams in which water was stored to be rationally distributed later according to the needs of the farmers . . . In this way, the government achieved a series of objectives: it established a deeply entrenched, solid, and conservative class of medium-sized property owners with which it moderated the otherwise extremist impetus of the agrarian revolution, while at the same time passing itself off as a government that had not abandoned its principles and that was still able to inscribe on its banners that barbarous motto of “Land and Liberty.”

⁷⁴ Because a strike is what one finds on the edge of silence, but it is also silent itself. The strikers become silent, but they have a voice . . . Men acquire another voice, another way of walking, another look, and one begins to feel something powerful in the air rising like a firm mass. It is a question of absolute

Natividad's role in organizing the strike is part of his commitment to the Revolution after the armed revolt. His presence is propitiatory of a new sense of communitarian power that is described in almost mystical terms by Revueltas. "Como si Natividad fuese poderoso y múltiple, hecho de centenares de hombres y de mujeres y de casas y voluntades" (156).⁷⁵ This description contributes to the phantasmagorical character of Natividad, which has at least two effects for the apocalyptic logic of Revueltas's novel. First, it makes Natividad into a prophet who functions as an apt pivot to garner the necessary social traction for the congregation of a community of redemption (the workers strike to advance towards their own terrestrial preservation). At the same time, Natividad is such an extraordinary, honest, loving man that he reads more like an affective device onto which the hopes of the narrator and the characters are projected. Natividad is the love of this community, which is to say that their individual and collective fates are, through him, irrevocably intertwined.

— 5 —

Standing atop the engineering feat that was the irrigation system, Natividad has an anticipated vision of the problems to come, but in a movement that is absent in the rest of the novel, he also projects a vision into the future: For Natividad the revolution is not a single moment in history, but the establishment and defense of a collective pact to preserve the possibility of a future for the land and those who work it.

wonder. There is a substance nourished in the atmosphere, as if men's hearts had come together to erect walls of energy and as if something important and absolute were about to take place.

⁷⁵ It was as if Natividad were powerful and multiple, made of hundreds of men and women and houses and wills.

—El agua no sirve —explicó— y la tierra tampoco. El Sistema podía salvarse, sin embargo, con abonos, mejorando la presa y estableciendo una gran cooperativa... Perder la huelga era perderlo todo... (186).⁷⁶

But, as it is often the case with prophetic visions, the details of the predicted ailments are off. The debacle of the irrigation system comes, indeed, dragging the rest of the town with it. But it is not the quality of the soil or the water that brings this about. All is lost when a more intrinsic problem with *El Sistema* manifests itself, namely, the cement curtain of the main levee begins to crack. The “walls of energy” that the strike erected by the workers also suffers a fatal blow with the assassination of Natividad. Adán had been commissioned to perpetrate the crime, but having fallen under the charismatic spell of Natividad, he is not able to accomplish the deed, so instead instructs two other men to deliver the execution in the middle of the night.

The unfortunate confluence of these events sets the conditions for the accelerated upheaval of the town. Shortly after Natividad’s death, the exodus begins and there is only a handful of families left to survive the inconstancy of the river. Once more, the land turns into the barren patch that it had been before the irrigation system was instated. Natividad is laid down to rest in that land, under that soil, and following a germane dissolution. He, too, is a scatological remainder. The time of the narration of *El luto humano* comes in the aftermath of this process of corruption. The mortuary tone of the resolution of the strike and of the assassination of Natividad serves as a bridge into the last image of the four survivors atop the roof, holding on to their own little death that is already sitting quietly, black and white and livid in that prolonged moment before entering the body.

⁷⁶ “The water is not good,” he explained, “Neither is the land. The Irrigation System could save itself, however, by introducing fertilizers, repairing the dam and establishing a large cooperative. If we lose the strike we lose everything.”

Los zopilotes giraban en torno de los náufragos... De paso habría que decir que la raíz de la palabra zopilote, compuesta de *tzotl*, basura, y *pilotl*, acto de levantar o recoger.

Eran basura los náufragos, basura terrible:

Hacíamos de cuenta / que fuimos basuras / y que un remolino nos alevantó, / y el mismo viento / allá en las alturas, / allá en las alturas, nos aseparó...

Ningún pueblo tan grande como aquellos cuatro náufragos heridos a un mismo tiempo por el rencor y la esperanza ¡Ahí estaban, vigilando su cadáver, su pequeña Chonita, su gran profunda muerte de basuras con ánima! (107–108).⁷⁷

This is a terrible image of an end without redemption: a series of premature deaths, a collection of mortal remains, and a sentient heap of garbage. This is the end of the revolutionary sun, an apocalyptic cancellation of its time, of its place and its people; there is no offspring to reach a future, nothing but debris of the dispossessed, of their rancor and resentment mixed in with their love, force and timid hope. But it is precisely this insistence on the scatological dimension of the collapse where Revueltas resists the logic of the apocalyptic cancellation. Both the Bible and the pre-Columbian myths are unconcerned with historical, terrestrial time, and the details about the materiality of the world that comes to an end are sparse and have disappeared from the narration once the new era is announced. There is no real, continued space for debris and corrupted matter in paradise (nor in hell for that matter), nor under any new sun. The proverbial

⁷⁷ The buzzards were circling above the shipwreck victims . . . It ought to be pointed out that the root of the word *zopilote* is composed of *tzotl*, garbage, and *pilotl*, the act of lifting or picking up.

The shipwreck victims were garbage, terrifying garbage:

We understood / that we were pieces of garbage / and that a whirlwind / had lifted us up, / and the very same wind, / there in the heights, / there in the heights, / had separated us . . .

There were no people greater than those four shipwreck victims tortured by both resentment and hope. There they were, standing guard over their corpse, their tiny Chonita, their great, profound death of garbage with a soul.

tabula rasa is the masterful sleight of hand by which mythical time can be breached by an absolute chasm, which cannot be traversed by anybody.

The bones of Cecilia, Úrsulo, Calixto, Marcela, and Chonita will be bleached by the vultures and the sun, the cruel waters of the river will level the houses, leaving the land more desolate than ever. But underground lie the mortal remains of Natividad, and the image of his deliverance from the greed of the vultures is evoked in the last paragraphs of the novel. Natividad understood that the land “demands the efforts, the dignity, and the hope of man,” and his longing for “transforming the land implied a man new and free, on a land new and free.” This idea was never defeated; it was, rather, brutally interrupted and transformed into mortal fragments (186). This is the undefeated, fragmented utopia that Revueltas decides to save from the vultures; to the elevation of garbage, he prefers the dormant force in the image underground.

Sebastião Salgado's *Terra: Struggle of the landless*

— 1 —

Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado began his career in photojournalism in 1973 while working as an economist for the International Coffee Organization. This earlier career often took him to Africa, where he began taking pictures of the communities of coffee producers. Soon, Salgado's interest veered definitively to photography, where he never lost the social pre-occupation that conditioned his encounter with African coffee producers as visual objects for the first time. Throughout the years from the early 1970s until today, Salgado's photographic work has captured images of communities in distress from all over the earth: Migrants, refugees, manual laborers, and landless peasants offer the viewer a global account of the human face of misery. This account is the result of a double logic of accumulation and manipulation that we can see at work in Salgado's corpus: accumulation, because of the monumental dimension of every one of his projects, compiled after years in contact with his subjects, following them and documenting the many visual instances that make up his collections; and manipulation, because these accumulated images are all given what could be called the "Salgado treatment," which involves formal choices such as the exclusive use of black and white, and a sustained interest in the formation of patterns.

While much of the commentary about Salgado's work focuses on his depiction of misery and the ideological significance of the aestheticizing effect of the "Salgado treatment," the critical engagement with the formal elements of such treatment is definitely sparse. What stands to be gained by turning the attention to the inner logic of Salgado's visual edifice is, on the one hand, a better understanding of the undeniable force that these images possess, and on the other, a more complex account of the

difficult marriage of ever-present apocalyptic doom and relentless utopian hope that are as constant an element of the “Salgado treatment” as is the use of black and white. And central to this connection between apocalypse and utopia is the equally significant interaction between the human subjects and the landscape in Salgado’s pictures.

The spatial context of these images functions as an extension of the human figures that it hosts. Generative and excremental, the land under the “Salgado treatment” always appears to be conditioned by the same circumstances as the subjects who populate it. The story that Salgado’s landscape seems to be telling is that people and the land look like one another, with formal patterns beginning at the human end and running all the way through to the land as well, so that people formally belong to their spatial context. Salgado also seems to make the assumption that the rural landscape is the spatial context that speaks more clearly to what he aims to say about his subjects. Cities, with their potentially recognizable landmarks, are conspicuously absent in most of Salgado’s collections, and the result of this exclusion is yet another factor of image manipulation of the “Salgado treatment.” By using only a black and white chromatic palette, framing displays of formal patterns that include human figures and landscapes repeated across time and geography, and excluding landmarks, Salgado achieves the full effect of his signature manipulation—creating a visual continuity that insists that the human animal arranges itself in relation to its space following consistent patterns that look strikingly similar on every continent.

Latin America is the name of the particular landscape seen in *Terra*; more specifically, the spaces in Brazil that witnessed the arc of the story of the Landless Rural Workers Movement, or MST in Portuguese (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra). The book, which opens with an introduction by José Saramago, includes images previously published in Salgado’s *Other Americas* (1986), plus other new images, all arranged in five sections and interspersed with poems by Chico Buarque. Both the text—Saramago’s introduction, Buarque’s poems, and Salgado’s detailed captions that

close the book—and the order of the visual images describe a precise narrative that was absent in the aforementioned *Other Americas*. Even the sequence of the titles of the five sections, which are only mentioned in the captions, already declares the logic behind the chosen disposition of the images:

The people of the land

The workers of the land

The force of life

Migrations to the city

The struggle for the land

The “terra” of the title appears repeatedly in the titles and images and is at the very center of the ideological narrative arc of the project. This arch begins with the communion of the people with their physical surroundings, continues with their interaction through labor practices threatened to disappear with the interruption of the circumstances of the workforce. The interruption of the relationship between the worker and the land then leads to a fracture of the *status quo*, but at the same time, produces new manifestations of life. The city appears as the space of utter fragmentation of the community, and as some peasants opt for migrating to the cities, Salgado’s pictures read almost as a cautionary tale of the devastating alienation that awaits the community in the urban grid. Finally, the focus returns to the rural space as the stage for political organization and the protection of a fragile, utopian remainder. This is a painful chapter in the story of the Brazilian land, which is the object of desire and contention around which five million peasant families organize their lives and bodies; this “terra” appears reiterated and multiplied in this book, but mainly as an absence, as an organizing and mobilizing void.

Before seeing the photographic images, the reader of *Terra* is presented with contextualizing writing that forms its own textual image. The juxtaposition of these two types of image is responsible for the tone of the project, which is ostensibly preoccupied with a large statement of empathy for the peasants' misfortune; but it is not exempt from the guilt-inducing force proper to displays of the misery of others placed in a context of consumption of a cultural product meant for leisurely reading and observation. But such juxtaposition—or more precisely, the gap it produces between the richness of the visual image and the constricted scope of the textual one—has the additional effect of opening this project for a reading that is independent of the moralizing, single-note discourse of the textual interventions by José Saramago, Chico Buarque, and Sebastião Salgado himself.

The accumulation of meaning in the sequence of photographs in *Terra* is not spelled out for the observer by virtue of the images alone. Rather, it is perceived either as the promise of a later resolution that will come from the author, or as a provocation to reflect on the images and deduct the meaning from this observation. In any case, it is clear that there is a purpose beyond the mere enjoyment of the pictures *qua* visual compositions; in other words, the flag that Salgado hoists here is that of photojournalism, and not that of art. In this context, the texts serve as situational satellites to the images, aiding the reader in the formulation of the more or less straightforward “message” of *Terra*.

The dedication that opens the book already contains several terms that will be repeated throughout.

This book is dedicated to the thousands of landless Brazilian families who survive in makeshift encampments along the highways, struggling and

hoping one day to win a piece of land on which they can be productive in dignity (Salgado, Buarque and Saramago 5).

The gesture implied by this dedication is a complicated one; it reveals a double target to whom the words are addressed. At the most literal level, this book is intended for the families of the MST, the family members of the subjects of the photographs who went through the tribulations described in these lines. But even if the MST families are the affective target of the dedication, the display of those details about their lives and struggle betray a second target audience, namely, all those who read the book and are unfamiliar with the particular history of the MST. *Terra* opens with this double play, which inaugurates the informative intention of its publication at the same time that it inevitably shows the particular position that the subject of the photographs occupy in the project as a whole. They are made into the nominal (and visual) core of the book, as well as its stated addressee; but the execution of the texts and the photographs treat the multitude of displaced families less as an interlocutor than as a deaf-mute object to be explained, poeticized, shown, and manipulated into a coherent image of self-replicating misery.

José Saramago wrote the text that serves as a preamble to the pictures, beginning with a sarcastic biblical reference to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, gauging the words of Genesis against the bleak reality of life in the Brazilian countryside. The preoccupation of the first half of the introduction seems to be with the divine oversight that allowed so much misery to exist despite its supposed omnipotence and infallibility. If god ever chose to ignore the writer's advice to avoid the sight of Brazil's rural communities, Saramago writes,

[H]e would surely recognize how unimportant a god is after all since . . . so many errors of foresight (and errors so gross) were committed in the creation of humanity, such as that, unpardonable in any view, of providing human beings with sweat glands and then denying them the

work that would make them (the human beings and the glands) function (9).

It is only halfway through the brief text that we find a concrete reference to the violent repression of members of the MST by military and paramilitary forces that on April 17, 1996, ended with a count of 19 dead peasants and several dozen wounded. The rest of the text explains in a straightforward manner the major details of the struggle of the MST for the land and the little and ineffective efforts that a string of Brazilian presidents took to address the necessity of a thorough agrarian reform in the country. They did not, for example, distribute significant plots of land to the peasant communities that demanded them. The final lines of this introduction go back to the religious preoccupation of the first pages, imagining the substitution of the Christ statue on top of Corcovado Hill with a sober, terrestrial sign calling for justice and respect of the law.

Saramago's text is imbued with the usual and unmistakable tone of his prose, which lends the *cache* of his pen to the MST cause. But by the same token, the affectation of Saramago's thick style tips the balance of the text, appearing to privilege metaphoric wordplay over the denunciation of injustice in, for example, the sustained, intertextual reference to the Bible that the writer chose to frame the discussion of the murder of 19 peasants and the decades-long struggle of the MST. More significantly, the constant reference to Christian faith seems to tie it indissolubly to the struggle of the landless peasants, only to dismiss the validity of the religious register—and, by association, that of the political struggle.

The religious thread continues with some iconic references in Salgado's photographs and the three poems by Chico Buarque that appear among the pictures. The first, "Brejo da Cruz," appears only in the last third of the book; it evokes the image of dispossessed children feeding on light, some of whom die young and ascend to heaven, while others survive and turn into adults with menial, exploitative jobs. The image of the light, poverty, and youth tied together suggests that the children of the

poem live in grace as long as they have those three attributes, but they lose their connection to the light in the context of the adult world that exists and functions in the alienating space of the city, far away from the rural landscape of their childhood.

The second poem, "Construction," is an account of the life and death of a construction worker. It describes the man's familial life and love, his simple pleasures, and the mind-numbing labor that requires him to put his life in peril, until one day he loses his footing and falls from on high and into a busy street. This brief story is repeated three times in the poem, rearranging the adjectival words and phrases, so that the tone changes even if the story does not. Each iteration erodes the lightness and grace of the first time the story is told, until a sense of doom and alienation defines the description of the fractured body of the worker on the street as a nuisance to the passersby. Throughout this poem, Buarque uses several turns of phrase with biblical resonances, such as a restful Sunday and prodigal sons, and he describes the fall in almost enchanted terms, producing the image of the worker floating in the air rather than rapidly precipitating. The communion with the family and the sacred observances of the weekly rituals starkly contrast, once more, with the life of the worker in the middle of the city, where reason, logic, and profit dictate the direction and rhythm of labor. The result of this alienation is physical death and the fracturing of the grace in which the worker seemed to live the first time that Buarque tells his story.

Finally, "Raised from the Ground" reads as an extended metaphor that insists on the image of people uprooted from the land and floating without secure footing or any general sense of direction, much like the victim of the most vicious attack of vertigo. The last two stanzas connect the traumatic separation from the land and the subsequent free-floating disorientation with the image of rural workers as heavenly cattle, using a biblical rhetoric filled with flocks and celestial pastures.

Floating farmer? Is that it?

Heavenly pastures? A celestial corral?

A flock in the clouds? But how?
 Winged cattle? Ethereal stallions?
 So odd a tillage! But how?
 Ploughed fields in heaven? Can it be?
 What orange, what apple will rain down?
 Buds? Nectar? Hail? Manna? (111).

Buarque suggests a clash between, on one hand, the religious discourse of Christianity that promises salvation in heaven and on the other, the terrestrial, historical reality of uprooted peasants who are used to working the land and who find no consolation in the false heaven that the poet constructs out of their floating about. Instead of repeating the words of the Vatican that command resignation on earth to attain salvation in heaven, the poem stops every step of the way to question if and how it is possible to conflate the terrestrial and heavenly realms using images and phrases common to both. If the poor are the Lord's flock, are they to graze in heaven by being turned into cattle for eternity? Is living "up in the air" similar to "ascend[ing] to the celestial kingdom"? What does heaven's land produce, and how does that look like from earth? Ultimately, the string of questions aims to poke definite holes in the Christian metaphysical promise of eternal salvation.

— 3 —

The texts of Saramago and Buarque notwithstanding, the most significant written information in *Terra* is penned by Salgado himself. The photographer offers extensive captions and a clear structure to the tenuous order suggested by the photographs alone. These captions and titles come at the very end of the book and clearly read as an

addendum that is to be taken into account, but only as secondary to the images. They offer a historical context that clarifies the time-line of the project and, and they briefly describe the most relevant moments in the development of the MST. The density and specificity of the information change the effect that the photographs have on their own, turning them into utilitarian tools to understand the political and sociological dimensions of the lives of the landless. At the same time, the explanatory text suffocates the ambiguity and even the mystery that shrouds the subjects in the pictures, therefore limiting the multiplicity of meanings of each photograph, making them work only as illustrations of the homogeneous discourse put forward by the activist author. In some extreme cases, the captions actually seem to run counter to what is conjured by the formal elements in the image.

Of the three authors in *Terra*, Salgado is the only one who tips the balance of his textual composition to the informational side. Saramago and Buarque display a more poetical attention to language. This might be explained by the fact that Salgado uses photography and not written language to exercise his creative drive, so in the captions he finds the opportunity to voice his activist argument without having to compromise the creative integrity of his work. Even though he has always claimed to be not an artist but a photojournalist, and despite the fact that the informative and the ethical dimensions of all his books are central to each project, the reality is that his visual compositions largely escape the tight grip of his activist politics, clearly provoking a rift between the discourse of Salgado-the-public-figure and the rhetoric of the compositions of Salgado-the-visual-producer.

The book's first two sections of photographs, as defined by the divisions of the captions at the end, offer a good example of the almost contradictory relation between the photographs and Salgado's explanatory text. The first two photographs of the book are included under the title "The People of the Land."



Fig. 30. Yanomami youths at the northernmost region of Brazil, Roraima, 1982 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1982 (London: Phaidon, 1997; print; 16).

The accompanying text to figure 30 provides an (extended) explanation that evokes none of the sense of tranquil suspension that the subject in the foreground evokes. The relation of the bodies of these adolescents with the water of the pond and the trees around it give no indication of the text's claim that doom and laboriousness taints the connection of the Yanomami to the land they inhabit.

[The natural destiny of these Yanomami], their historical freedom, and, more precisely, their freedom of choice, first began to be brutally threatened in the 1980s by the project of colonization of the virgin lands in that part of Brazil, an area so large that it is virtually a world in itself.

Obeying the perverse logic of geopolitics which is characteristic of a military dictatorship linked to a centralized economic programme and without any democratic assent on the part of the Brazilian people . . . the face of the virgin lands of the Brazilian North and Northeast was radically changed. The transformation brought about the elimination of a great part of the traditionally extractive activity which had been developed over centuries of the gradual merging of western culture with the life of the tropical rainforest and led to the isolation and the totally non-migratory practices of the indigenous nations (138).

Landscape and traditional practices, the caption argues, were radically altered by the economic measures of the last military dictatorship during the 1980s, but while the text tries to frame the image in a specific historical context, the image shows the extension of the “natural relation” of the Yanomami with their land, one that precedes and is not dictated by the “perverse logic of geopolitics” under the dictatorship. The picture shows the communion and continuity of the human subjects with their physical context as having almost mystic overtones. No historical reference can be inferred from the observation of figure 30. Instead, it shows a rather clichéd image of the noble indigenous subject immersed in an idyllic and ahistorical relation with the land.

Another instance of how discourse imposed through the captions overwhelms alternative interpretations of the photos or exploration of other important aspects of the history of the MST is the treatment of the religious vein of the lives of the photographed subjects. Religion is part of the narrative of the captions, but its mention is limited to a few examples, such as the following: the saintly priests who travel the countryside to satisfy the eucharistic needs of the landless, as in the section “The People of the Land;” the biblical paradise-like character of the cacao plantations in “The Workers of the Land;” the connection among the churches, cemeteries, processions, and communal prayer with the quotidian reality of death and drought that this population endures in

“The Force of Life;” and finally, the charitable shelters that the churches sponsor as seen in “Migrations to the City.” The remaining section, “The Struggle for the Land,” is notoriously secular; it is as if religion is a compartmentalized portion of the experience of rural workers that connects them to atavistic practices that belong mainly in the countryside, and which can only offer an imperfect consolation for the hardships of the uprooted life.

The religious experience of the displaced Brazilian peasant is muffled by Salgado in at least two different ways. First, by the distortion resulting from the encounter of the visual image with its corresponding caption, which either erases or reframes the mystic reverberations of images of communion among people or of people with the land, discarding them as the unsightly dregs of dark superstitions to which the peasant returns when threatened. In figure 31 we see a powerful image of sacred continuity whose significance cannot be exhausted by describing it as atavistic.



Fig. 31. *Sertanejo* (worker of the backlands) with his son, Ceará, 1983 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1983 (37).

These workers of the arid lands of the Northeast *sertão* are in reality the vassals of rural landowners who usually live in the capital cities and have either never seen them or seen them only rarely. Often working without a contract—which in no way would save them from the exploitation and miserly wages—the field labourers are further from everything and caught up in the midst of a dark and pervasive mysticism. When prolonged drought strikes, the heightened despair forces them to abandon everything and migrate to the cities (138).

Earthly redemption, for instance, can be read into this triple portrait of the son, who is godly and human at the same time. Jesus Christ does not represent the spirit of the Old Testament, which commanded blind obedience to god and the resigned suffering of hardships as tests for a metaphysical salvation; rather, as the incarnation of the godly into the terrestrial, Jesus Christ is the emblem of justice, love, and redemption on earth, and as such is a very relevant figure in the lives of the Brazilian rural workers.

The second way in which the religious experience of the landless peasant is muffled is by simple erasure. As we have established, there is no mention of religion in the section of captions titled “The Struggle for the Land,” which suggests falsely that the political organization and mobilization of the MST is perfectly divorced from the “dark and pervasive mysticism” that takes hold of those scattered around in disconnected places, like the *sertões* of the Northeast. But what Salgado neglects to mention in his otherwise information-dense captions is the political importance of what Michael Löwy has called the “socio-religious origins of Brazil’s landless rural workers’ movement.” More specifically, Salgado erases (at least in his text) all traces of the influence of liberation theology in the MST’s “struggle for the land.”

This distortion of religion’s role is sustained by Saramago’s introduction as well as by Buarque’s poems; just like Salgado, they include the mention of biblical tropes and images only to describe them as ineffectual and pernicious in the same breath. It seems

that when considering the lives and collective fate of the members of the MST, these three authors are able to notice the most superficial manifestations of religion; but they are only able to superimpose their own experiences of religion as an institution with a very different face compared to the specific weight it has for the development of political consciousness in the MST. What liberation theology has in common with secular forms of berating religion is a criticism of the Vatican's interpretation of Christianity and the notion of salvation in the afterlife, but their main difference is the powerful notion of a terrestrial redemption that liberation theologians rescue from the teachings of the Bible, as Löwy explains:

The millenarianism . . . of liberation Christianity—is expressed in the socio-religious utopia of the "Kingdom of God," not as a transcendent quality projected into another world, but as a new society here on earth, one based on love, justice, and freedom. However, contrary to traditional millenarian beliefs, this "Kingdom" is not conceived as imminent but as the result of a long march—*caminhada* is the Brazilian word—toward the Promised Land, following the biblical model of the Exodus. The present social struggles are theologically interpreted as stages that prefigure and herald the "Kingdom." A reading of the Bible that is innovative and charged with a social sense of history is one of the decisive formative elements in this *sui generis* millenarian faith and its transmission into working-class strata (Löwy 35-36).

The image of Jesus Christ in figure 31, therefore, has a political significance that Salgado dismisses completely, reading a retrograde attachment to a providential faith where an image of utopian human agency stands. This is but one example of the clash between the discourse of the activist and the rhetoric of the photographer, in which the activist places a mask of secularism over the phenomena he is following. Salgado's captions only marginally acknowledge the presence of the church and its rituals in the

lives of the landless, and they place a validating emphasis on the political organization of the MST, while neglecting to explore the link between these two dimensions, which, on the other hand, is already prefigured in the photographs. The lens of the photographer seems to understand more than the writer-photographer is capable of formulating in his captions. Salgado-the-photographer does not filter out the utopian vein that runs in the MST, but he nevertheless rearranges it and covers it with a coat of the “Salgado treatment,” making the images unequivocally his, almost to the point where the object of the portraits seems to be his own unmistakable style and not the struggle of the landless peasants. Rather than trying to decide which formal elements belong to one source and which to another, the following pages contemplate the effect that their confluence conjures on in Salgado’s plates.

— 4 —

The most recognizable formal gesture of Salgado’s photos is repetition. Often his compositions look like a visual reverberation of one single form that goes from the most simple groupings of similar subjects to more sophisticated instances of visual reiterations that involve the human figure and other non-human elements in the landscape. This gesture is even more effective when it is seen taking place consistently throughout a series of photos. In the case of *Terra*, the most evident and simple expressions of repetition are the portraits of small groups of relatives.

All the pairings in figures 32, 33, and 34 repeat each other not only at the level of physiognomic similarities, which could be explained by the fact that the subjects are related to one another, but the compositions make sure to capture other iterations that go from the clothing (or the lack thereof) and headwear (in figures 33, and 34), to age

and gestures (active hands and pensive gaze in figure 33, flaccid faces and arms in figure 34). And the similarities continue on more detailed, geometrical, and textural levels as well: The oval shape of the torsos of the toddlers in figure 32 is echoed by their heads, the pacifier of the one on the left and the object they are holding in their clasped hands; the texture of the cotton blouses of the workers in figure 33 reflects the light in a similar way; and the folds in the austere shirts of the workers in figure 34 produce similar lined patterns in their chests.



Figs. 32, 33, and 34. Clockwise from left, children at Rosa do Prado encampment, cotton field workers, and sugarcane workers, from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra* (105, 47,46).

These repetitions act as a provocation to the observer. They suggest a sense to be discovered in these patterns. When the iterations are so many that they cannot be attributed to chance, they transit the road of meaning from simple formal echoes devoid

of significance to the realm of elective affinities. The isolation of the pairs from other human figures reinforces the sense that these two human animals found each other and discovered in the other some basic trait that they also possessed. The repetitions are too numerous to be explained by pure chance, and the continuities are too bizarre to be just the product of careful staging. So, what is the reason for these compositions to occur and for the camera to capture them? The answer to this question is not spelled out by Salgado, but in its pull lies the force that makes his work so effective in captivating the viewers' attention.



Fig. 35. Three young guests at a wedding in Bahía, 1982 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1982 (26).

The same gesture of the intertwined young hands in figure 32 is repeated in figure 35. The symmetry of the composition is also repeated, and the sense of meaning is

established in the latter by the physiognomic similarities of the two girls on the extremes, the color of their dresses, and the undulating shapes of their hair. The new element in this composition is the third member of the group who is not an exact replica of the other two, but it is included in the formation of a pattern, functioning as the central, pivotal figure; the three girls are uniformed by their age, their interweaving hands, and their unblinking stare fixed in the direction of the photographer. This look is so severe and determined that it is difficult not to read in it the same intention repeated three times. Once again, the precise nature of the intent behind the stare—the question, “What do these three girls want to communicate with their pose?”—will not be unveiled in the pages of *Terra*, but the stare itself, nevertheless, has two clear effects: first, it conjures a mystery shared by the three subjects in the photograph; and by making them the collective recipient of such mystery, the three individuals become a single signifier, a community built on the basis of the secret that they share (and hold back from the photographer and the observer). This is the revelatory character of Salgado’s photographs—he plays with visible elements (the girls, the stare, their shared traits) to point to an invisible riddle (the mystery they possess, from which the viewer is excluded).

In figures 36 and 37 the mystery is constructed by repetition of the same shape in different vectors—the bricks on the floor, the wooden panels of the door, the animal bones, and the angled limbs of the children—which produces a grid in which the arranged objects have a specific value or meaning granted to the position they occupy.



Figs. 36 and 37. Young children of the *sertão*, Ceará, 1983 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1983 (6, 67).

The corresponding caption explains that the bones are used as toys in the *sertão*, and that they represent different animals according to their size and actual animal origin. This explanation, however, does not exhaust the mystery encapsulated by these two photos. The attention of the children is directed to their game, but they do not seem particularly playful with their eyes set on the bones while avoiding the lens of the camera. They seem more like half-naked demiurges preoccupied with imparting the right order to their universe (worried hands on the head), lest disaster and death overtakes it completely. The bones of the animals are echoed by the ribcages of the two children lying on the floor in figure 36, inviting a reflection on death as the shared limit of all the subjects in the composition: the dead goats, cows, and horses that the bones represent, the lean children, and the attentive live goat framed by the door opening. Being an animal, human or otherwise, requires the same basic conditions for survival,

which are never taken for granted in the drought-ridden Brazilian Northeast. The mystery that holds together the community of this photo is congealed around the presence of death as the limit that conditions life in the *sertão*.



Fig. 38. Children after a sermon in Pernambuco, 1982 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1982 (23).

The caption for figure 38 mentions the role of one Catholic missionary who visited isolated communities in the Northeast, satisfying their need for sermons and confession each time he visited for a day or two. The photo, however, does not show the saintly man but a small group of young, male parishioners, all of them with torsos bare, the texture of the hair repeated seven-fold, three of them looking at the camera while four avoid it. The bodies arranged in a close pack receive the light on their right side, still leaving a considerable portion of the composition in the darkness. Repetition,

proximity, and the high contrast between light and darkness make up the mystery of this group. These boys seem to be the first line of the embodied communion—the communion of form, of elective affinities—on which the religious life of their community rests. 1982 saw the definite beginning of the mobilization of the MST as an organized political entity with a demand for agrarian reform that would give back the land to those who work it. Religion (*religare*) is the binding force that strengthens the precarious, uprooted lives of the landless peasants, but not a religion of rites imparted every so often by a missionary, but a communion that is both cause and effect of their self-determination as a mobilized collective.

— 5 —

The force of the political demand of the MST is based on the defiance of logic revealed by its oxymoronic name: The Landless Rural Workers' Movement. As Saramago points out in his introduction, it is a gross contradiction to remove the tool that sustains the way of life of a community that derives its collective consciousness precisely from the contended tool. The resolution of such contradiction can come from two different directions: Either the workers turn to another occupation that is not based on their relation to the land, or they reclaim the land to justify their subjective position as rural workers. The struggle of the MST is placed in tension between those two alternatives, and Salgado's book gives visible shape to the contradiction and to the two scenarios of possible resolution.

First, the visual rhetoric of *Terra* insists on the contradictory character of the alienation of the rural worker from the land, by visually consolidating the notion of

community as was shown in the previous section; the next step is to extend the formal affinities to demarcate a new frontier of the community to include the landscape.



Figs. 39 and 40. Sugar cane plantation workers in São Paulo, 1987 (left) and peasants building a dam in Ceará, 1982 (right) from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1987, 1982 (57 top, 58).

Repeated diagonal and vertical lines integrate the shirts of the female workers in figure 39 with their background, and the line of peasants walking down the road in the background of figure 40 reiterates the pattern of the reeds that separate two parcels of land in the foreground. In these photographs the formal similarities exhibit the rural workers as the owners of the will that shapes the world and themselves following the same patterns. The vegetation in these two photos is not naturally occurring. It is the result of the intervention of the human hand on the land. The choice of the striped patterns in the shirts of the sugar cane workers and the line formation of the peasants returning from work is theirs to make. Even if they did not make those choices to echo

the landscape on that precise occasion when Salgado took their picture, the patterns of the world on which the peasants intervene surround them completely, not unlike a language, a lingua franca, that the world of objects and the people share.



Fig. 41. Vaqueiro in the backlands of Paraíba, 1982 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1982 (57 bottom).

In figure 41, the conversation between landscape and the people is so clear that it is difficult to make out the limits between them. As the cattle-hand is preparing to lead the cattle through the harsh vegetation, the bodies of his companion and family arrange themselves in an overlapping, interweaving manner similar to that of the cacti behind them. Each one in the group is facing a different direction, just like the prickly background; and even the rounded tops of the vegetation announce the shapes of the hat of the men and the oldest child and the gentle curve of the foreheads of the younger children. The harshness of the terrain notwithstanding, the human animal always seems contained by the rural landscape in Salgado's photos, therefore making the

argument that to conceive a landless rural worker disrespects the nature of their elective affinities.



Fig. 42. State-run orphanage in São Paulo, 1996 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1996 (94-95).

Comparing figure 41 to figure 42, it is easy to understand the second stage of the argument formulated by *Terra*: that trying to resolve the contradiction embodied by the landless peasants by migrating from the countryside to the city is clearly a dystopian scenario. The babies in figure 42, states its caption, were abandoned by their migrating parents who, once in the city, found they cannot afford to maintain their families together. But the caption is superfluous when the rhetoric of the photograph so clearly establishes the contrast between rural and urban landscapes. In the city the arrangement of the bodies of the babies also seem to mimic the sprawl of the built environment and the differences in the heights of the buildings in the background, while the shapes of the tops of the two groups follow two clearly distinct patterns:

While the skyline is made up of right angles, the heads and bodies of the babies produce an undulating line. Salgado captures the human figure in a moment of formal incompatibility with the artificial shapes of the buildings, unveiling his opinion of urban dwellings in general as an alienating context in which their human inhabitants can only hope to survive but never to thrive. The babies' bodies do not form a harmonious collective like the boys in figure 38; they seem crammed together rather than close to each other; and (in the foreground, right) there is one dark-haired older baby shoving the head of a younger one onto the floor. In general, it is difficult to distinguish the limits of each small body in their chaotic and seemingly unattended disposition.



Figs. 43 and 44. A cell in the 33rd police precinct of São Paulo, 1996 (left) and church-run homeless night shelter in São Paulo, 1996 (right) from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1996 (90, 92).

The chaotic disposition of the immigrant bodies in the rigid grid of the city furthers the sense of alienation in their new surroundings. Jails and shelters like the ones shown in figures 43 and 44 are full to the brim with peasants who abandoned the

pursuit of their lost land, finding it equally difficult to occupy a position in the grid of the city that would make their individual value recognizable as it was in their rural landscape. Instead, these peasants find only an empty, undifferentiated slot to occupy for a while, a space that will be taken over by another new immigrant for whom they are completely interchangeable, according to this urban spatial logic.



Figs. 45, 46 and 47. Homeless teenagers living in cardboard boxes (left), a family living in a makeshift shelter between the support beams of an overpass (middle) and one inmate of the over-crowded Carandiru state penitentiary peeking through a slot in the door (right) all in São Paulo, 1996 from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1996 (84-86).

If the body of the peasant matches and continues the rural landscape, making one an extension of the other, then by contrast, the body of the rural immigrant in the city is the object of a process of reticulation, alienation, and fragmentation. Figures 45, 46, and 47 show this fragmentation of the human form; in all three of these images (and to some extent in the rest of his urban pictures), Salgado shows that the human body is disarticulated and interrupted by the structures of the urban environment; only the heads and little, disconnected glimpses of skin escape the cardboard box, the makeshift shelter, the heavy door, or the ill-fitting clothes.

Following the rhetoric of his visual compositions, Salgado discards the option of solving the crisis of the landless peasants by migrating to the cities, which leaves only the choice of the struggle to reclaim the land.

— 6 —

Salgado's work possesses an undeniable force. His compositions are so impeccable that they often seem staged; they are so tightly packed with correspondences, similarities and repetitions that it is very hard not to read the promise of an epiphany in them. This revelatory character is granted by a combination of the urgency of the specific social, political phenomena that he brings to the attention of the viewer and a generous portion of what we have called the "Salgado treatment." The struggle of the landless rural workers fits squarely in the scope of the photographer's interests, being an instance of a large community whose way of life is threatened and may disappear.

One can find this same sense of urgency before a definite collapse in other works by Salgado, such as *Sahel: The End of the Road*, about the challenges faced by the inhabitants of drought-ridden North Africa; *Migrations*, about the flux of large communities around the world forced to migrate for natural, economic, or political reasons; *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age*, about the grim future of manual, industrial laborers around the world; and *Genesis*, the project he is currently working on, about the few spots on earth that have escaped the reach of humanity. Salgado carefully chooses (chases?) projects that allow him to capture the last moments of a specific *status quo*.

Salgado's photography is apocalyptic. By "apocalyptic" I understand the cultural products that offer a narrative framework, be it secular or religious, to declare the end

of a specific state of things, and I understand that a narrative framework can work as much in texts as in visual objects. However, to define the apocalyptic as merely an eschatological tradition, exclusively concerned with the declaration of the End, would imply an inaccurate and limited reading of apocalyptic narratives. In the case of *Terra*, for instance, Salgado seems to be much more interested in a moment of suspension prior to the collapse, which is also an important structural element in all apocalyptic narratives (in the canonical case of the Bible, there is a long moment of silence after the opening of the seventh seal and before the descent of heaven to earth). Before its collapse, the old order reaches its highest brightest point of intelligibility; it shines clearly for the first time, right before losing its solidity and dissolving into air.

Bright and intelligible are the photographs in *Terra*, almost too much so. They seem to provide us with an unequivocal definition of how the struggle of the Brazilian landless peasants looks. The repeated gestures captured in the photographs invest this collective subject with a sense of universal *gravitas* that has concrete consequences for the understanding of this phenomenon in its historical dimension.



Figs. 48 and 49. Children asking for charity on a highway in Ceará. 1983 (left) and a collective blessing of a meagre ration of bread in a shelter São Paulo, 1996 (right) from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1983, 1996 (80, 91).

Figures 48 and 49 are separated by thirteen years and by the specific circumstances that provoked the repeated gesture of their subjects, but that difference is muffled by the

heavy-handed insistence of the photographer in portraying all landless peasants as sharers of a coherent, collective material language. This language, these signs, these measures are, quite literally, *Logos*: that form of knowledge, which, according to the ancient Greek philosophers, hides in nature and is only revealed to the one who is attuned to it. Salgado's *Logos* speaks in the language of similitude and repetition. This is the defining character of apocalyptic photography—the lack of space for variation, for equivocation, for different arrangements to be tried out. The images seem so “perfect” in the formal similitude of their elements, that (just like the word “perfect” already suggests) no slippage, no change in them is foreseeable; they are shining in their most brilliant light.



Figs. 50 and 51. MST members preparing to occupy a plot of land in Paraná, 1996 (left) and celebratory manifestation at one expropriated *latifundio* in Sergipe, 1996 (right) from Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, 1996 (113, 132-133).

This sustained fascination with simple patterns of formal reiteration ultimately suffocates the historical specificity of the MST's fight to reclaim the land for those who work it. Figures 50 and 51 ultimately show that the photographer sides with the style that tinges all of his *oeuvre*, in which the liberal application of the “Salgado treatment”

makes the disaster brought about by extended periods of drought in Sahel look very similar to the struggle of landless rural workers in Brazil.

The photographer is unfortunately blind to the deep religious character of this political group that congeals their collective identity more than any repeated gesture of the hands, and he is also impervious to the revolutionary character of the particular breed of utopian hope of the MST, whose search for redemption would not take place in an ahistorical, apocalyptic moment, but on earth and only by the intervention of politically mobilized contingents. Even though some traces of the remainder of a utopian hope are still visible underneath the coating of Salgado's style in *Terra*, the photographer ultimately sides with the apocalyptic perfection of his own making.

Matilde Sánchez's *El desperdicio*

— 1 —

This novel by Argentine writer Matilde Sánchez tells the story of Elena Arteché, a fictionalized account of literary critic Mónica Tamborenea over more than three decades—from her childhood in Pirovano, in Buenos Aires Province, to her years in Buenos Aires, and then back to the family farm, “San Antonio.” The narrative structure of *El desperdicio* draws a circular journey driven by youthful rejection of the rural life and a subsequent reclaiming of this familiar realm. The first-person narrator reconstructs the image of Elena in hindsight, from the moment of her funeral, revisiting three distinct ages in the life of the protagonist: her childhood and early youth in Pirovano in the shadow of her family; coming of age and young adulthood, which bore a distinctly urban sign; and the final return to the countryside and to the paternal enterprise of agriculture after the death of her sister and until her own.

With the advantage of hindsight the narrator conjures a generational portrait that, even though it lacks any direct historical or political reference, has its own gravitas and complexity, and it bears the name of Elena Arteché. In front of the coffin where Elena lies, the narrator considers her mortuary image, and decides that “Esa imagen, sin embargo, no se cierne sobre ella ni sobre el cementerio. Abarca un territorio mayor, es una imagen que arrastra una época, forma un todo con su tiempo y progresa hacia un año negro, el año negro” (Sánchez 14).⁷⁸ This is Elena-as-epoch, and her death does not close only an individual biography, rather, it tells the story of her generation. The

⁷⁸ Such image, however, is not congealed around her or the cemetery. It extends into a larger territory, it's an image that drags a whole generation along with it, and it becomes one with its time while it progresses towards a black year, the black year.

specific events that marked the political atmosphere of Argentina during the dictatorship of the 1970s, the return to democracy of the 1980s, and the corruption and excesses that accompanied neoliberal experimentation are notoriously silenced in the voice of the narrator. Which is to say, they are not mentioned by name; but they could be traced, nevertheless, reading the story of Elena as part metaphor, part effect of the changing social and political landscape of Argentina in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Central to this portrait of Elena-as-epoch is the image of the land, *la tierra, el campo*, the countryside, as the locus of affect for the protagonist. Her approach to this image is always mediated by different modes of altered perception—misrecognition, exaggeration, distortion—which yield vastly different landscapes to which the protagonist claims a relation that changes accordingly throughout the years. The city in this novel is the locus of desire, at least at the beginning, and it permeates the story from beginning to end, being the location of the gaze of the narrator. Even when the narrated action takes place in the countryside, the perspective of the narrator continues to be fundamentally alien to its surroundings. In a similar manner, the land is carried about by the protagonist as an introjected splinter of the affect that mediates her relation to all things and subjects.

There are three distinguishable moments in the periplus of the protagonist's journey, and the image of the countryside is basic to all three of them. Throughout the first two, the image is produced and gains traction as the object of opposition against which Elena and her sister aim to define themselves. The third step can only be taken by the protagonist after her sister dies of cancer and the family farm is threatened by debt and a generally hostile economic environment; in other words, an approach to the image of the land (maybe even the fatherland) can only be ushered in by a general sense of devastation, which turn it into a wasteland

The first image of the land inaugurates the periplus followed by the protagonist moving from the countryside to the city and back. In this first moment, the countryside is the landscape of family life and childhood for the protagonist. As an affluent, traditional family, the Arteches reap the benefits of the ever-bountiful Argentine soil, under the auspices of the “Revolución Argentina,” which was beneficial to those producers who were willing to embrace technological improvements. Even though the good fortune of the Arteches as described in the first part of the periplus must have been necessarily affected by the specific economic policies advanced by the Onganía government, the portrait that the reader is handed is that of a familial enterprise in a countryside that remains unaltered by history, persistent in its blind drive to produce. And to the seeming inalterability of such abundance they oppose a conscientious procurement of tokens of culture. The land, the Arteches thought, would always yield the same steady stream of undiscerning life, which would then be transformed into manure-scented wealth, which in turn would pay for the idiosyncrasies meant to distinguish the family as a culture-embracing, progress-touting bunch.

A fines de los sesenta llegó la capitalización. Arteche ya había erigido los silos de chapa, pioneros del partido. Si las carteras de reptil eran el atributo de mando de Chanito, esos silos lo eran de su esposo. Recién entonces firmó la compra de un Mercedes blanco en comisión para su mujer y al retirarlo de la concesionaria, ella encontró en el asiento trasero un abrigo de lince, en reemplazo de la nutria, y para las hijas, relojes de acero inoxidable...

Si algún inconveniente tenían esos padres era un exceso de fe en el progreso, consideró Inés (28).⁷⁹

This constellation of objects, the attributes of the progressive landowners, are metonymic devices for the protagonist, her sister, and their two female cousins. This generation of Arteches see in the tin silos, fur coats, and luxury cars a manifestation of a cultural inheritance they find easy to scorn and reject. For the young girls, the products reaped from the exercise of cultivation of the land betray a faith in progress that is paradoxically attached to a brutish, atavistic begetting of life that can only replicate itself endlessly.

Elena's rejection of Catholicism and her mother's teaching vocation is coherent with a disdain for the institutions by which the countryside traditions were transmitted and passed down through the generations. It can be argued, however, that this rejection is a miscalculation on the part of the group of young Arteches; the risk of the metonymical understanding of their inheritance is that while it makes it possible to repudiate a constellation of concrete objects and practices, it leaves their conditions of production unexamined. This basic equivocation traps the protagonist into an ideological loop that irrevocably leads her back home even as she imagines herself escaping from it.

The land and the wealth that it produces are made into a static background against which the protagonist and her cohort want to distinguish themselves. Before they take off for Buenos Aires with plans not to come back, the girls erect their own generational altar to culture and progress; to their parent's tin silos, they oppose massive amounts of

⁷⁹ At the end of the sixties came capitalization. Arteche had already erected tin silos, the first of the province. If the exotic handbags were the power attribute of Chanito, those silos were that of her husband. Only then did he bought a white Mercedes specially commissioned for his wife, and when she went to the agency to pick it up, she found a new fur coat on the back seat, to replace an old one, and for the girls, stainless steel watches . . .

If there was any problem with those parents, it was their excessive faith in progress, Inés thought.

impalpable literary, musical, and cinematic references as the real signs of progress of their age.

En sus silos mentales acopiaban himnos de rock... Para ellas la transformación no se encontraba en la política sino en las disquerías y los libros, en toda expresión que abonara el pesimismo romántico y las lecturas existenciales. Todo Herman Hesse se leían y a Salinger, el teatro de Beckett; a Camus, entero se lo tragaban. Todo Sartre y a Neruda, Cortázar, Guillén . . .

Al rato ya estaban conspirando las cuatro para irse de ahí a la Capital. A comienzos de los setenta Buenos Aires conservaba su aura de ciudad literatura...

Cómo evadirnos de esta destilería de bosta, dijo Elena esa noche. Pero no como la Gallardo, irse para seguir escribiendo novelas rurales. Mejor irse de una vez y no volver a pisar... (28-29).⁸⁰

Cut off from historical contextualization, the countryside—and the notion of “patria” that is often associated with it—gives Elena no grasp of the zeitgeist and her generation’s culture, so instead she turns to the fetishes of the urban bourgeoisie, which looks to international cultural products to find a collective sense of belonging. Buenos Aires at the end of the 1960s was about to enter a complicated, violent decade, in which politics were at the center of the life of the city (and the rest of the country). But politics, we learn, are not part of the collective register in which the Arteches’ youth is embedded. They go to the city to forget about *el campo*, that manure factory, and to

⁸⁰ In their mental silos they collected rock and roll anthems . . . For them, the transformation didn’t lie in politics, but in the record shops and in books, and in any expression that strengthened romantic pessimism and existential readings. They read all Herman Hesse and Salinger, Beckett’s theater; they swallowed Camus in its entirety. All Sartre and Neruda, Cortázar and Guillén . . .

Shortly afterwards, the four girls were conspiring to go to the capital. In the early seventies, Buenos Aires preserved its literary city aura. . . .

How can we flee this manure distillery, Elena asked that night. But not to write rural novels. Better to go and never set foot here again.

fully embrace a life of uniqueness and overflowing creative energy that was meant to sever their ties to the atavistic forms of production and the immutability of the family land.

— 3 —

Life in the city for Elena Arteché means a newly found sense of belonging in the middle of an anonymous crowd and a simultaneous uniqueness that surrounds her as an auratic field that sets her apart from her generational cohort. At a distance, the image of the family land as rejected inheritance offers the starkest possible contrast with Elena's new life, even when prolific cows and fertile soil directly finance that very urban, intellectual, sophisticated life. The basic proposition that drives her recent urban persona is that the countryside is the realm of immutability, while the city offers the ever-accessible opportunity for uniqueness among the multitude.

Again, historical contextualization feels surgically removed from this second moment in the narration. The political convulsions of a city caught between active claims to power from the extreme left and right can only be guessed in the passing observations Elena makes about the zombie-like appearance of the demonstrators after the end of a march. Equally, the immutability of the productivity of *el campo* in the Argentina of the 1970s is simultaneously central to the protagonist's identity in construction, and it is willfully artificial. Politics and the violent marks it inflicted on those years fall out of the register of the narrator, who suggests that Elena's image, rather than any historical event, congeals the experience of those years for their group of friends and colleagues: Elena-as-epoch.

During the years in the city, the image of the countryside contracts into a rather charged signifier that defines Elena's mode of inhabiting the urban and social grids. *El campo* goes from the landscape of her childhood to a sort of repressed remnant of the origin; it is embedded in Elena's identifying features as an undigested fragment that is rejected and repressed, but whose idiosyncratic manifestations are embraced as signs of uniqueness. In contrast to the immutability of Pirovano, life in Buenos Aires imposes a regime of verbal exuberance and sexual experimentation on the protagonist and her cohort. And it is precisely in these two realms that Elena distinguishes herself among her friends, even if the image of the countryside continues to determine—by an exaggerated opposition—her speech and sexuality.

The Arteches sisters adopt the theoretical mannerisms of the moment, letting their speech be peppered by esoteric jargon, the *shibboleth* that guaranteed their belonging to the urban, intellectual bourgeoisie of the age. The protagonist frequently found occasion, for instance, to use the Russian term *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) to describe a range of phenomena that could or not pertain to literary and artistic realms. And this highly specific terminology is combined in Elena's speech with words and turns of phrase that are decidedly rural. The combination of the two registers, according to the narrator, is not contrived affectation, but the testament of the uniqueness that distinguishes the Arteches among their peers. This distinction is described in positive terms, and it might be at the core of the fascination that the narrator exhibits regarding the image of her protagonist: Elena is portrayed as the eccentric pivot of her group, showcasing the interests and passions of her generation, while at the same time being "a touch out of place" and "anachronistic." The countryside is the sign behind the *ostranenie* that characterizes Elena among her equals; the image of *el campo* from bookish Buenos Aires is often as much a dislocated time as it is a fundamentally different space.

The rural splinter that Elena carries incrustated in her speech manifests as unusual word choices (she called legs and feet "patas" and abdomens or stomachs "tripas") and

as compound tenses that had long been extinguished in the city. But the most notable speech pattern displayed by Elena is the negation thereof: Elena's silences interrupt the ever-flowing verbal stream of her group.

Pese a las explosiones de verbosidad por las que sería bien conocida y al sarcasmo que perfeccionaba a modo de porteñismo, tenía una notable capacidad para hacer silencio. Esto era poco común en nuestra pandilla, regida por el hábito de rivalizar en el ingenio... El silencio pertenecía a la geografía del yermo y el despoblado, creíamos. Helen siempre estaba fuera de la competencia sencillamente por estar más allá (39).⁸¹

Silence is equated with a barren, uninhabited land, which is in turn interchangeable for the image of the countryside as a prodigious factory of self-perpetuating life. And Elena is synonymous with both verbal scarcity and overabundance; she is described as a master of both modes in her linguistic performance, which puts her beyond comparison with anyone in her cohort, unique in her category of defamiliarizing linguistic presence.

Elena's sexuality is the second realm where the introjection of the image of the countryside marks her life in the city. The first years that the protagonist spends in the city see the sexual experimentation, which despite the ardor with which she engages it, is traversed by an undercurrent of bourgeois, Catholic repression. While she pursues sexual encounters with working class lovers, Elena thematizes repression as a central personal as well as professional interest.

Elena había crecido en la provincia de Buenos Aires y esto se notaba en su interés por todo lo *reprimido*. Era éste un tópico muy insistente. En principio, empleaba siempre la palabra y en contextos muy diversos. Lo

⁸¹ Regardless of the explosions of verbosity for which she would be known, and of the sarcasm that she cultivated to a *porteño* perfection, she had a remarkable capacity to be silent. This was very uncommon in our gang, which was ruled by the habit of wit rivalry. . . Silence belonged to the geography of the barren land, we thought. Helen always was simply beyond any competition.

reprimido participaba de una especie de crítica universal por así decir generativa —la palabra podía calificar algo superficial o denotar tibieza, falta de coraje. Una narración podía tener párrafos *reprimidos*, el gobierno podía tomar medidas propias de un *reprimido*, y desde luego el mundo estaba lleno de *reprimidas* y *reprimidos*... De hecho, la obsesión de Elena por el conscripto de Marina, pasajera pero intensa, se desprendería de este interés morboso por lo *reprimido*, que no es otra cosa que la fascinación puritana del pecado (37-38).⁸²

The use of the term *represión* is noteworthy in reference to a multitude of instances, among which politics is just one of many. The tangential mention of the government and its actions as being *repressed* contrasts with the highly politicized meaning that the same word had in Argentina of the 1970s, when the dictatorial military junta was usually called *los represores*, clearly identifying them and their regime as the perpetrators of the repression, rather than just a channel for its manifestation. Here the narrator seems to suggest that repression was something almost banal—a sort of moralistic containment that prevented the full expression of desire—which led Elena to unintentionally betray the sign of her Catholic upbringing in the very same movement by which she willed to escape it. But, while this reading of repression can be revelatory of the complexity of the character of Elena Arteché, it says nothing of the much more violent significance that repression held during those years, when the official institutions not only wrote *párrafos reprimidos* in their official communications, but persecuted, mutilated, and killed political militants. Again, the narration of *El desperdicio* performs a defamiliarization and repression of Argentine history that follows

⁸² Elena had grown up in the province of Buenos Aires and it was obvious in her interest for all things *repressed*. She was very insistent in this topic. She always used that word in the most diverse contexts. The *repressed* was part of a kind of universal critique, so to speak, generative—the word could qualify something superficial or denote lack of courage. A text could have *repressed* paragraph, the government took measures proper of a *repressed*, and obviously, the world was full of *repressed* men and women . . . In fact, Elena's obsession with working class lovers, temporary but intense, came from this morbid interest in the *repressed*, which is but the fascination of a puritan for sin.

a logic parallel to the other forms of repression it describes—just as, according to the narrator, Elena is not able to see the extent to which repression is deep-seated in her own psyche, the novel itself seems oblivious to the echoes it provokes when read against the grid of history.

— 4 —

El campo is part of what is repressed by Elena when she moves to the city; it contracts into fragments or nodules charged with complex meanings, but which are identified by oversimplified metonymic images: silence, anachronism, linguistic idiosyncrasies, and Catholic morality. But overall, the image of Elena as a city dweller is that of a promising cultural producer; her wit and agile intellectual engagement with the cultural sphere point far away from her origins and towards a life dedicated to the pursuit of a different kind of cultivation.

El modo en que Helen pasó de este curso acelerado de ajuste a una concepción tan sofisticada de la literatura, es decir, cómo se convirtió en una lectora excepcional y en crítica de teoría, no hay que buscarlo en las ambiciones de su familia ni en el modelo materno, es decir, en ninguna categoría de los orígenes sino sobre todo lo contrario, en la influencia de la época y el ambiente (43).⁸³

Running away from Pirovano, her mother, and the land, Elena frantically embraces new influences and turns herself into a magnifying device to reproduce these influences to

⁸³ The way in which Helen went through a speedy adjustment to such a sophisticated conception of literature, which is to say, the way she became an exceptional reader and theory critic, must not be understood as a result of her family's ambitions or any maternal role model. In other words, the reason lay not in any category of the origins, on the contrary, it was the result of the age and the environment.

the highest degree, while infusing them with just enough defamiliarization to make them her own. Elena, then, functions as a passage or catalyst that takes the stimuli from her environment, processes them, and passes them on with her mark imprinted. This is evidenced in the description of her academic production during the 1980s, when history starts to seep into the narration with an account of the difficulties that the return to democracy meant for publication of literary or theoretical criticism. Elena's intellectual production is dispersed into the academic sphere that surrounds her, forgoing any official and permanent channels of expression.

Difícil aquí exponer el contenido de la crítica de Elena Arteche sobre todo porque el grueso de los textos quedó diseminado en esos centros de fotocopias, papeles destruidos con el correr de los años, desvanecidos por la mala calidad de las copias en las que se cargaba poca tinta a fin de economizar, demasiado húmedos en la oscuridad de precarios roperos para servir de algo cuando el papel empezó a reciclarse. Nada había más caduco que el juego de fotocopias de la semana anterior... Enseguida de ser terminados, frescos aún los punto y aparte, los estudios de Helen dejaban de pertenecerle e ingresaban en el torrente colectivo y de inmediato se tomaban como referencia, transfundidos a las cátedras más renovadoras, que la exprimían como sanguijuela. Quien se molestara hoy en reunir las fotocopias de la época y las leyera en orden, descubriría hasta qué punto sus ideas eran robadas, ampliadas o recicladas en la gradación que va del digesto al homenaje (45).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ It's hard to explain the content of Helena Arteche's criticism, mainly because the larger part of the texts was dispersed in copy centers, in papers destroyed over the years, faded in bad quality xeroxes, too damped in the darkness inside old closet to be useful when people started recycling paper. There was nothing more useless than the set of photocopies of last week. . . Right after being finished, periods and commas still fresh, Helen's texts stopped belonging to her and entered this collective stream and was immediately taken as a point of reference, as a fresh transfusion to other classes, which milked Helena's work to the last drop. If someone today took the time to collect the photocopies of those years, and read them in order, they would realize to what extent her ideas were constantly stolen, amplified, or recycled in a gradation that went from the rumination to the homage.

Now, Elena herself turns into a fragmentary production that is less an intellectual inheritance for future generations than it is a form of intellectual virulence, dispersing her influence in a context menaced by caducity and irrelevance. Her words become waste at the turn of each new week, but infect a mass of readers in the meantime. It is impossible to quantify the influence that Elena achieves under these particular conditions of production. The tempo and rhythm of the protagonist's life during the 1980s is revealed in part by this description of her mode of intellectual production, but the play between present exuberance and silenced future is more precisely displayed in her mode of being among her peers, in her ravenous disposition for stimulating conversation interrupted here and there by the well-calculated suspension that her silences create. This pattern of explosive effusion interrupted by sudden extinction is also revealed in the image of the protagonist's smoking style.

Lo que más le gustaba era la primera parte del cigarrillo, la que inaugura la promesa de duración —un pacto renovado con el chasquido fugaz del papel, como todo lo que arde... Los consumía muy rápido fabricando una larga brasa ardiente. Y cuando quedaban todavía unas pitadas por fumar, más que apagarlo lo aplastaba, partía el resto en dos, de manera que la colilla a veces quedaba un rato humeando a modo de incienso.... Un filtro pisoteado es una de las pocas cosas que terminan ahí; no hay nadie que lo recicle, no tiene después ni remedio, es el punto de no retorno de la basura (47-49).⁸⁵

Elena prefers the beginnings, when things hold the promise of novelty and projection to the future, but the continuous effort to make that first incendiary outburst

⁸⁵ Her favorite part of the cigaret was the beginning, that moment that promises duration—a renovated pact with the fleeting burst of the paper . . . She consumed them quickly, producing a long burning ember. And when she still had some drags left to smoke, rather than put it out, she crushed it, she broke the rest in two, so that the butt remained burning like incense for a long while. . . A stepped-on filter is one of the few things that end right there; there is no one that would want to recycle it, it has no future or remedy, it is the point of no return of garbage.

permanent escapes her. Following the years of her urban education in the 1970s, she seems full of an exuberance, which like “everything about Elena was consumed in extremely quick processes,” and did so without leaving any permanent trace. Her essays, in progressively worse xerox copies are like the last two or three drags of the cigarette, both of which she sacrifices to be lost beyond repair or hope for productive reincorporation, when she violently puts off her half-smoked cigarettes or when she loses track of her printed words every week (75). The memory of this flame recreated by a witness will be the only inheritance that Elena leaves for the future. In this fast-burning exuberance rests the singularity that she opposes to the immutability of the countryside, and her apparent renunciation to a permanent manner of productivity puts her at odds with both the expectations of her urban cohort as well as the steadfast fertility of the countryside.

By the beginning of the 1990s, the stagnation into which the family land had fallen for a few years starts to lift, while Elena’s published production remains stuck. Even though there are momentary spells of focused work, her professional and personal life do not align to open the containment walls of her creative dam, as everyone around her thought would indubitably happen. She continues to teach, moving between Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata seasonally to comply with her academic commitments without renouncing the city completely. These years drag the promise embodied by Elena, always postponing its realization, while the country (even though, again, the historical and political context are a very distant afterthought in the narration) is going through a period of apparent overabundance based on the immediate satisfaction afforded by the sell out of the country’s resources and industry to foreign capital. As the narrator notes, these years cancel the “cycle of comedy” that were Elena’s years in the city.

In the mid 1990s, Carmen Arteché is diagnosed with cancer of the mediastinum and dies two years after that. This is the blow that cuts short her sister's life in Buenos Aires. All the symbols that pertain to the family are inflamed in Elena with the demise of her sister Carmen. Previously described by relatives and friends as being hardened, Elena finally caves in and turns softer and less determined in her intention to lay off every trace relating to the life in the countryside.

Right before her death, Carmen Arteché marries a long-standing lover, whose interested gesture of timely engagement did not go unnoticed by her family. This direct menace to the family patrimony that never interested Elena prior to this moment acts as the catalyst for her decision to go back to live in Pirovano for good. And with this decision, the protagonist undertakes the return to *la tierra*, beginning the third and last movement of her periplos of the countryside and the previously rejected birthright it represented.

For the first time in the novel, historical context takes precedence. Elena's reasons for going back to the San Antonio farm are explained as part of a concatenation of historical events, whose effects were finally noticed and cited by the protagonist as a determinant factor to the fate of the Arteches. "El paisaje mismo había cambiado en pocos años. La fauna se alternaba, el clima se había vuelto impredecible... Los latifundios ya no existían ni para arrebatarnos ni para combatirlos" (91). After all, the land was not immutable and did not form a vast, uniform whole whose production was equally unchangeable. Ever since the nineteenth century, the Argentine *campo* had been subjected to a progressive fragmentation and dissolution; the *latifundio* was nothing but a symbolic relic of a time of land partition and leasing, and the image of "manure-scented money" was an anachronistic figure of speech in a land where cattle-breeding is

no longer considered productive and the land yields its square footage to the cultivation of oil-producing grains and soy.

The return to San Antonio, thus, should not be understood as a reconciliation of the protagonist with the faith in progress that her parents exhibited in their time. A change of perspective mediated her return; the death of Carmen excited in Elena a sensibility for manifestations of the image of death, collapse and dissolution. The signs of death loomed everywhere, and they tinged the image of the countryside completely. Far from being the wholesome meat and grain factory that Elena and Carmen so despised, the soil of San Antonio is filled with reverberations of death, which by affecting the (father)land, make the private tragedy germane to a cataclysm of national proportions.

La situación de la San Antonio era, en verdad, idéntica a la de miles de productores por esos años. A ese cuadro general había que agregar los créditos tomados durante la enfermedad de Carmen, que excedían la tasación de los patrimonios. Enterrada Carmen, había que levantar ese otro muerto... Los productores registraban antes que nadie la crisis financiera, los chacareros se habían convertido en vanguardia del desastre. Alguien debía volver a ocupar la naturaleza antes de que el capital la comprase (112).⁸⁶

Although the narrator attributes the mention of capitalism to the influence of Elena's partner and father of her child and dismisses it as ranting, she is less forgiving about the confluence of familial and patriotic symbols that Elena exhibits, which seems to go in the opposite direction to the urban, bourgeois life that the protagonist created for herself (and which the narrator and the rest of the common friends shared). The friends

⁸⁶ The situation of the San Antonio farm was, in deed, identical to that of thousand of producers in those years. To that general picture one needs to add the loans taken during Carmen's sickness, which exceeded the appraisal of the property. Once Carmen died, it was necessary to revive that other dead. . . The producers were the first to notice the financial crisis, the farmers had become the vanguard of disaster. Some one needed to occupy nature before capital could buy it.

from the capital want to interpret Elena's retreat to Pirovano and her sudden embrace of her birthright as nothing but the specific form that mourning takes for her, and they hope that it is only temporary.

Los campos siempre habían sido atribuidos a la esfera del padre. Ahora empezaba a referirse a ellos con respeto, hablaba por primera vez de *nuestros campos*... Aunque no la empleara todavía, tenía la palabra patria en la cabeza...

Se lo hicimos notar... Reaccionó furiosa...

Cuando uno dice mi casa, no está pensando en una tasación inmobiliaria. Cuando el último obrero dice mi fábrica, no reivindica una propiedad sino un tramo de su rutina, una costumbre del cuerpo. Bien, de ahora en adelante el campo debe ser mi fábrica en peligro...

Nos costaba aceptar que hubiera emprendido lo que se dice el regreso a las fuentes. Seguíamos pensando que se trataba de viajes metafísicos necesarios en el proceso del duelo y que se curaría con el tiempo (111).⁸⁷

Disaster, ruin, and fatality are the lens through which the countryside seems to Elena, for the first time, a cause worth vindicating. The acceptance of the inheritance of a wasteland rather than a productive, vibrant land represents not so much Elena's return to the origins, but a completely new form of engagement with the material conditions of her existence. Seeing menacing signals around her, Elena seems to remember something that she never knew: that she is consubstantial with the land, and both are marked by a fragmentary nature, always at risk of not yielding a proper production,

⁸⁷ The fields had always been the realm of the father. Now, Elena started to refer to them respectfully, she spoke for the first time of *our fields* . . . And even though she didn't use it yet, she had the word fatherland in the head . . .

We called her attention to this. . . She reacted furiously . . .

When one says my home, one doesn't think about a real estate transaction. When the last worker says my factory, they don't claim a concrete property, but a fragment of their routine, an organic custom. Well, from now on these fields will be my threatened factory. . .

We had a hard time accepting that she had begun the return to the origins. We still thought that it was a metaphysical part of the mourning process and that it would fade off in time.

despite the promises to the contrary that their potential seemed to extend. She is now, after all, interested in occupying her place as the intergenerational chain-link to discover the sign of waste (*desperdicio*) in the land as much as in herself, and to pass it on to her son. If this third movement of the periplus is a return, it can only be the return of the repressed.

The signs are everywhere. Elena interprets a series of images offered by the countryside landscape as the first concrete manifestations of a pattern of the surfacing of subterranean (and thus invisible) forces. The first one is a series of floods that were said to have a double source: an unusually copious rainy season and the saturation of the aquifers, which in turn erupted through the ground to alleviate excess pressure. These conditions created a phenomenon that bore the sign of disaster, a veritable cataclysm, threatening the productivity that had always been the heart, the core characteristic, of the Argentine soil. There was talk of building an alleviating channel to relieve the fields of the water that had turned them into improvised ponds.

Pero las obras oficiales volvieron a suspenderse por mal tiempo y los vecinos quedaron preguntándose cuál cosa habría precedido a la otra, si el error de la naturaleza o la catástrofe humana, si la lluvia o esa zanja a medio cavar, cómo y en qué punto llegó Desgracia y quién invitó a Miseria, personajes de la comedia del arte adaptada a la realidad campestre...

*Donde había sequía hoy tenés tormentas diarias. Ya lo ves, una casa puede ser una isla rodeada de agua y cielo hasta donde la vista alcanza. Lo irónico es que Miseria embelleció el paisaje (115-116).*⁸⁸

⁸⁸ But the official works had to be suspended due to the weather and the neighbors were left wondering which preceded which, if the natural disaster or human catastrophe, if the rain or the half-built relief ditch, how and when Disgrace came in and who invited Misery, character of comedia dellarte adapted to the rural reality . . .

Where there had been drought now you have daily storms. You see, a house can be an island surrounded by water and sky as far as the eye can see. The irony is that Misery embellished the landscape.

Elena reflects on the fact that even when that whole crop season is wasted, the manifestation of such devastating disaster takes the form of an image from which aesthetic pleasure, if not grains, could be derived. This observation betrays the alternative value of the countryside, which circulates especially in the urban, bookish Argentine imaginary, namely, that of an aesthetic construct that comes in handy at various historical junctions to reinterpret the equally imaginary definition of the Argentine nation. Elena forgoes the usual images and characters of the *pampa*, which populate Argentine literature, and instead she turns the cataclysm into a scene of *commedia dell'arte*; she dwells on the irony of a tragedy begetting beauty, thus maintaining her professional bias, and showing that even in the middle of the wasteland she decides to call home, she still exercises the defamiliarizing formalist gaze that she held so dear.

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Fittingly, the floods inaugurate an ominous period that leads to the cataclysm, that “año negro,” which the narrator announces from the very beginning of the novel. The signs that Elena finds in the land of the political and economical crises the country is on the verge of—even if they are deformed by her stubborn aestheticization—all follow the same mechanism of the manifestation of the repressed. They are explained by her and by the narrator in terms of regression, barbarism, and loss. Soon after the floods, there is a series of murders in small towns, all of them committed by the town’s idiot. Elena and her friends focus on this phenomenon in their correspondence, dissecting what they called the “imitative pattern” of the crimes, looking for explanations in the logic of the repressed, which they think proper of the countryside where misery is permanently

but alternatively evident and hidden. Misery in the countryside is described as a subterranean, poisonous stream, which during periods of excessive pressure necessarily finds a way to alleviate this pressure (maybe the way aquifers rise to the surface from excessive rain, subterranean misery is also called to the surface by the first manifestations of the crisis unfolding above ground). The murderous *opas* were thought by the protagonist to be especially sensible to certain signs that could go unnoticed by others.

Elena's work as a literary critic and theorist conditioned her to apply the tools of her craft to her new environment. In the countryside her academic pursuits are definitely out of place, thus continuing her disjointed existence of always being out of place and anachronistic. She theorizes about the flood and the string of crimes, leading to the evocation of an image of the land that is a clear projection of her own inner landscape. It seems apparent that Elena's work in Pirovano is more concerned with the reimagining of her reclaimed surroundings than with any real involvement in the direct administration of the farm or with solving the financial morass in which San Antonio finds itself towards the end of the 1990s. The reconstruction of the old farmhouse is the only concrete (but interrupted) project she tackles; the rest of her time she spends pursuing what seem to be personal interests that take the form of intellectual enterprises rather than material interventions to alter the bleak conditions of the San Antonio farm.

When rabbit-hunting starts to spread in the region as a new form of livestock exploitation, Elena throws herself into a peculiar form of research into the lives of the impoverished hunters and the different actors who participate in this industry, which emerges in the middle of an ever-clearer national economic crisis. In this practice, she sees further evidence of the regressive forces that manifest themselves first on the countryside, but which would soon affect the entire nation.

Cuando hablaba con seriedad, la actividad misma, que había convertido la caza en un negocio conveniente a todas las partes... le parecía un sinceramiento de la debacle. Aunque la actividad dejara mucha plata, los cazadores seguían siendo muy pobres. Para ella eso significaba *literariamente más interesantes. . . Ahí tenés una parva de elementos paródicos, toda la picaresca. ¿Serán los herederos del gaucho? Mi teoría de la involución, ¡mi tesis de la regresión biológica!* (170).⁸⁹

Compared to breeding cattle, hunting for rabbits represents a clear step backwards in the line that separates civilization from primitive survival. "Culture" is, after all, the result of the mastery of discerning *cultivation*, and not the rudimentary systematization of massive killings of a species that is readily available in the environment and notoriously difficult to breed at an industrially significant scale. If the cow is the metonymic sign of the economic wealth and national pride of buoyant times, the hunted rabbit is an apt symbol of the crisis that overwhelmed Argentina in that black year of 2001. These improvised teams of hunters channeled "*El reflujo de energías fascistoides. Lo reprimido, los impulsos inhibidos que surgen incontenibles como un géiser y que, pese a haberse originado en fechas muy previas... están llamados a liderar una transformación*" (173)⁹⁰. The emergence of destructive forces from the past means for Elena a glimpse into her shared fate with the land. The anachronism of hunting instead of farming finds an echo in the protagonist's self-perception while the crisis of the country is found to be a perfect correspondence with her own dipsomaniac abuse and deteriorating health.

⁸⁹ When she was serious, the activity in itself, which had turned hunting into a profitable business for all parties . . . seemed to her a sign of decay. Even if the activity produced a lot of money, the hunters remained very poor. Which for her meant *more interesting in literary terms. . . There you have it, a mound of parodic elements, the picaresca. Are they the descendants of the gaucho? My theory of biological regression!*

⁹⁰ *A reflux of fascistoid forces. The repressed, the inhibited impulses emerge like a geiser and, even though they came from ancient times . . . they're meant to lead the transformation.*

Elena continues to witness signs that more and more clearly suggest patterns that link the human factor and the landscape, but just as in any prophetic announcement, the completed picture that the signs evoke is fundamentally ambiguous. The last link in the chain for Elena in her perceived concatenation of manifestations of the repressed is the testament of fragmentation and dispersion that she sees in the eruption of improvised shantytowns in the middle of the *pampa*. Legions of *linyer*as (homeless seasonal workers) find refuge in discarded industrial containers that still bear company names in large characters on their walls, producing small towns with no clear locations that usually do not last more than a few weeks. This image rounds out the ominous system of correspondences that Elena noticed before the crisis reveals itself with its proper name and devastating concreteness.

Elena no nos tenía acostumbrados a los sermones pero ese fin de semana se lo pasó diciendo que veía señales de una transformación mayor. *No te hablo de fantasmas, son anuncios objetivos por todas partes, dijo. Se me presentan conectados. Eslabones de acontecimientos humanos y evolución de la geografía, una dinámica en redes...*

Todavía no podría decirte cómo ni dónde se ve el giro, ni siquiera mostrarte las señales. Pero están ahí (183).⁹¹

The ultimate form of consubstantiation of Elena with the wasteland that was her reclaimed inheritance comes with the news of her own disease. With the familiar cancer of mediastinum, Elena inherits complete dissolution and loss. The announcement of the diagnosis inaugurates the black year that the narrator delineated as the temporal horizon of the novel. The year is 2001, when the whole of Argentina succumbed into an economic cataclysm that, as the narrator wants us to notice, had

⁹¹ We weren't used to Elena's preaching, but she spent that weekend speaking of certain signs of a major transformation. *I'm not talking about ghosts, I see objective omens everywhere*, she said. *They show themselves connected. Like chain-links of events and a geographical evolution, a dynamics of networks...*

I still cannot tell how or when will the change will happen, nor can I show the signs. But they're there.

already shown ominous warning signs in the countryside. Elena finds herself consubstantial to that devastated land that breaks down into increasingly fragmented, infertile pieces. She finds herself to be a makeshift mediastinum, which was always out of place while trying to bridge Buenos Aires, Pirovano, and Mar del Plata, connecting Russian formalism and the visceral knowledge that comes from a lifetime of living with cattle and poultry, suffering the familial tragedy to be able to foretell a national one.

— 7 —

When Elena embraces the inheritance she had rejected earlier, she changes from Elena-as-epoch to Elena-as-landscape, not a flattering image because the land is failing, and so is she. The two echo each other's decadence and disease. The narrative path laid down by *El desperdicio* opens with an illustration of sophomoric misrecognition in which Elena and Carmen Arteché despise and reject parental idiosyncrasies they mistake for ideological core. This misrecognition is further performed by the narrative voice with the conspicuous absence of any mention of historical context in the reconstruction of an age that was deeply affected by politics in Argentina. Evasion conditions the experience of the young Elena in her years of transition from Pirovano to Buenos Aires; it is no doubt significant that the theoretical persuasion of their entire intellectual family gravitates towards Russian formalism, which in its own historical moment was considered escapist and even offensive for its proposed separation of the work of art from any contextualization. The concept of *ostranenie* was born along with the Revolution of 1917, and although it was revolutionary in its own right, it was considered counter-revolutionary by the official cultural apparatus. Its relevance, however, is evident in its reactivation in a context as remote as Argentina of the 1970s.

But in the case of *El desperdicio*, defamiliarization seems more compatible with misrecognition and puerile rejection than with a solid defense of the uniqueness of the aesthetic artifact.

With the return to the land, defamiliarization takes on a different significance for Elena: It literally points to the loss of concrete signposts of familial belonging, namely, her sister Carmen and the San Antonio. The death of the former and the financial crisis of the latter, bring Elena to a disorienting return to her origins, and, like the first time around, it is only accessible to Elena through a distorting lens. Not a bountiful shrine to faith in progress anymore, the land is a mosaic of signs of regression and fragmentation, which Elena projects onto the land until the moment of her diagnosis. This is when the projecting nature of her interpretation of the land is finally revealed. After this point, Elena as a character stops having a voice, except maybe to say she understands that she has lost everything. The narrator at this point picks up the identifying thread that joins Elena with the land at precisely the moment of their shared, decaying fate.

Lo indudable es que Elena murió cuando murió no por causa de su enfermedad sino por las batería de inyectables, el platino, el oro, los metales que le metieron por las venas hasta que la Vasca se hundió —¡con semejante plomada!— en lo que llamaba el río de cangrejos. Traer a cuento ahora el asunto de la inundación no pretende forzar una metáfora trillada; en todo caso, resalta el toque sobrenatural de ese año negro. (Así y no de otro modo interpreto el avance efectivo de los cangrejos desde las flamantes riberas y la llamada “isla séptica” hasta el propio living de la casa nueva, unos cangrejos pálidos de uñas nacaradas que tamborileaban en cámara lenta por el piso del patio... Lo llamativo hasta extremos exagerados, es que la enfermedad de Elena y el derrumbe general hayan

coincido en el espacio y el tiempo. La vega privilegiada del Señor, el silo de las mieses bíblicas convertido en una cantera de pestes.) 277-278.⁹²

Defamiliarization as the separation between Elena's life and her material context recedes, and in its place we find the supernatural alignment of body and land, stitched together by the image of those repositories of life overtaken by germane plagues with biblical overtones. The stunted promises of fruitfulness that Elena and the land once extended to the future inhabit the same symbolic wasteland in the end.

El desperdicio admits in the end the fundamental importance of material conditions to understand the debacle of the character of Elena Arteché and the Argentine *campo*. To find the trace of history in this novel, it is necessary to turn one's attention to its effects. Elena Arteché in the novel functions as an amplifying device that picks up the signals of the age and embodies them, distorting them into an image that congeals Argentina's recent history as seen from the chasm that the crisis of 2001 opened. It is a story of unkept promises and wasted genius, where the only possible inheritance for the coming generation took the form of a residual survival drive—akin to the one displayed by the rabbit hunters, or by the *linyer*as organized in impermanent settlements, or even by the horse-driven *cirujas*, who ever since the crisis was felt by the lower working class, arrived “cada noche a la ciudad, a la cantera de desperdicios y materia informe que ofrece a la miseria su última mutación en mercancía” (96).⁹³ Elena laments this progressive loss of aura she feels all around her (of skilled work, productivity, proud mastery over nature and aesthetic pursuits). The imminent end of her life thwarted any

⁹² What cannot be denied is that Elena died when she did not of her disease, but because of the slew of injections, the platinum, the gold, all the metals that they filled her veins with until the Basque drowned—under such weight!—in what she called the river of the crabs. If I bring the issue of the flooding now is not to force a trite metaphor, rather, I do it to highlight the supernatural overtones of that black year. (Thusly, and not in any other way, is how I interpret the actual advance of crabs from the new riverbanks and the so called “septic island” to the living room of the new house, these were some pale crabs with pearly nails which they tapped in slow motion throughout the patio's floor . . . The most interesting part was that Elena's sickness and the general collapse coincided in time and space. The Lord's chosen meadow, the silos of the biblical harvests had been turned into a quarry of pests).

⁹³ every night, they went to the city, that quarry of refuse and that shapeless matter that offers misery its last mutation into a commodity.

positive appreciation of the possibilities offered by such liberation. What the end of the novel shows is the evidence of a country (previously described as still preserving its literary aura) engulfed by a crisis of epic proportions, but already sprouting unsanctioned means of survival based mainly on the exploitation of the marginal use-value of material remnants readily available in their environment (garbage, industrial containers, even rabbits).

Still enamored by the notion of aura and the allure of a body of work proper, Elena and the narrator suffer the stunted production of the protagonist as a literary critic as the ultimate, tragic defeat. Elena is the object of the allusion of the title of the book, presumably, since she was never capable of producing “un puto libro” (267).⁹⁴ The importance of Elena’s academic influence through those fragmentary texts she so copiously produced in the 1980s notwithstanding, she is set up as a “genio desperdiciado” by the narrator. When confronted about this perceived central character flaw, Elena sourly replies, “será que no se dieron las condiciones materiales,” adding a layer of mystery to the already inexplicable circumstances of her infertility. What could it mean for someone like Elena to have the material conditions to write a book? Not having ever wanted for anything money could buy, the material conditions in this case must allude to something else. This explanation is offered before the announcement of her disease, so that irrevocable material limit was not it either. Still, the stated fact is a recognition of the realm of material conditions, which escaped the protagonist during the first part of the novel. And it seems that this perspective is accessible only, or more easily, through a lens of loss and fragmentation.

⁹⁴ on damned book.

Latin American Wastelands: Apocalypse and Utopia

— 1 —

The image of the land in Latin America has always moved between two polarizing paradigms: apocalypse and utopia. In 1945, a twenty-eight-year-old Juan Rulfo published the short story “Nos Han Dado la Tierra” (“We have been given the land”), which serves as a punctual illustration of the tension between dreamworld and catastrophe in which the image of *la tierra* has often been depicted in Latin American literature and visual works (Vital Díaz): A dwindling group of peasants makes its way under a rigorous sun through the arid plain that the revolutionary government has granted them in an official attempt to uphold the promise of the agrarian reform. The land had been, as seen in previous sections, at the center of the demands voiced by the Mexican Revolution. Except, the land that the characters of Rulfo have been given is far from the utopian image invoked by the revolutionary maxim “Tierra y Libertad.” The plain in “Nos Han Dado la Tierra” is so vast that it takes the characters almost all day to cross it on foot, but it is dry and barren. At the end of the story Rulfo’s characters arrive to an edenic plot of land that would more closely represent the promised land they came to expect. But they will only cross it and will not stay there, as the land they have been given lies just beyond this fertile vision.

This opposition between images of generative and barren, excremental land runs through the three examples analyzed in the present chapter. Argentina, Brazil and Mexico share the importance of the *campo* as a locus of symptomatic manifestations of revolution and crisis. The three countries have an important tradition of agricultural production attached to the development of their national projects. And the decidedly urban flair of their contemporary configurations is always in dialogue with the image of

the land, onto which the urban cultural producers find a symbolic space to project otherwise elusive notions such as the past, the origins, the archaic, the retrograde, the vanguard, the revolutionary, the uncivilized, the pure, the genuine, the edenic. Mutual contradictions notwithstanding, these notions will be activated and perused to accommodate different ideological agendas, at specific historical junctions.

The three literary and visual narratives offered by José Revueltas, Sebastião Salgado, and Matilde Sánchez show the image of the land in a moment of crisis, when urgency and danger make themselves palpable in the relation that a country, a nation-state holds to its rural life. In a moment of pressing urgency and danger, these three cultural producers strived to capture a flashing historical image. The historical context and the specific political content of *El luto humano*, *Terra*, and *El desperdicio* are diverse, as are the narrative strategies that their authors follow to create the image of the land at its center, but they are all set on the same general scheme of imminent catastrophe and resistance, where dispossession threatens the protagonists with the absolute collapse of the *status quo* in which they live. The subjective position of the three authors and the protagonists of their works is significantly different from one another, and this distinction is an important one to make, but from their various vantage points they all are interested in unearthing a remnant of political significance from the barren womb of the wastelands they depict. They seem to interrogate their historical moments to determine what is there to salvage from the wreckage, and what are the consequences of the great suffering their protagonists go through. Their answers go from a timid account of a dormant utopian love, to the picture of what collective political mobilization can achieve, to the puzzlement that the conjunction of private and national catastrophe can leave in its wake.

Revueltas, Salgado, and Sánchez are all used to straddle the urban and rural spaces at least to the minimal extent necessary to tell their stories (in all of these examples, the authors lived in the countryside for a while, in circumstances close to

those being narrated in their works), which makes their work stand somewhere in the middle of those two perspectives. Neither completely urban nor rural, the perspective of the authorial voice in these instances discovers subtleties and patterns that would probably pass unnoticed for the locals, at the same time that they fail to factor in important elements of the circumstances they try to capture because they lack some basic experience that is readily available to the subject living in those circumstances.

This is not to say that cultural producers do not share the historical moment with the contemporary subjects they portray in their work, but that the place of production—somewhere in the middle of the city and the countryside—conditions the perspective of the authors, as well as their narrative strategy. Juan Rulfo is a classic example of the Mexican intellectual who kept his interest in the rural life, even after starting his career as a published author in the city of Guadalajara and later on, Mexico City. The following self-portrait (fig. 52) provides a visual account of the particular spatial disposition common to a number of Latin American artists and intellectuals when they engage the image of *la tierra*. Although they are part of the pictured landscape, they occupy a distant location that allows them to better contemplate it as a coherent vision, which does not exclude the risk of distortion or equivocation in their account of the perceived image. Figure 52 is a self portrait, but it is also a grandiose landscape; the artist creates here a double account of his gaze—Rulfo prepared the camera to capture himself in the act of looking down from the Nevado de Toluca. The doubled gaze makes the figure of Rulfo into another element of the landscape, one that simultaneously occupies and escapes the position of the producer of that gaze: in fact we do not see precisely what Rulfo is seeing while sitting atop of that boulder, nor is the composition that we actually see the exact one that Rulfo saw when he set up the delayed shot in his camera.



Figure 52. Juan Rulfo, *Autorretrato (Self-portrait)*, decade of 1940 (Vital Díaz 78)

Revueltas, Salgado, and Sánchez produce an image unearthed from a moment of urgency and danger, an image that is insightful and alien to the land itself. It is the vision of that land turned into a remainder, dregs of a promising version of itself, a wasteland. In different ways, the three of them reproduce an apocalyptic narrative into their work, but they also give way to the expression of a utopian drive that survives

fragmented in the middle of the wreckage—although this last part does not always seem like a calculated choice.

— 2 —

Apocalyptic narratives are among the oldest and more persistent ones throughout history and across the world. But in the case of the contemporary history of Latin America, one can trace the renovated interest in explaining politics, history, and cultural production through the logic of the ultimate collapse of the current order of things can be traced back to the watershed years of 1989 and 1991.

After the clear historical breach that this period has come to signify in the political international landscape, there have been claims coming from various corners of the academic realm that this change in the distribution of power and its consequential strengthening of capitalism have turned the world into a homogeneous space, where the notion of the nation-state has been all but erased, thus eliminating any effective “ground” on which any political opposition to the economic status quo is conceivable.

In the Latin American context this particular trend would be represented in recent years, by Alberto Moreiras, Willy Thayer, and Gareth Williams among others. For them, a “geocultural” change has taken place that deemed inoperative many of the tools proper of critical thinking. Chief among them was the Marxian possibility of contesting capitalism with a critique that, through a revolutionary formulation, would lead the way to a socialist utopia.

In Latin America, this three-year period had a special resonance because of the obvert germane nature that some of the political experiences of the region had with the Communist-Socialist system. Even beyond the international reconfiguration of the world according a post-Cold World logic, 1990 was an eventful year for the Marxian-

leaning politicians and intellectuals from Mexico to Argentina and Chile: this was the year when the Sandinista movement was democratically voted out of power in Nicaragua.

In this historical crossroads, is it possible to conceive a post-1989–1991 defense of the notion of a social utopia that revalues Marxian discourse? Which would be the political spaces from which this re-elaboration would be shaped? What would be the role of the ruinous, the excremental into this specific brand of utopia? What the following pages argue is that the image of the land in a moment of crisis, as it is presented in literary and visual products like *El luto humano*, *Terra*, and *El desperdicio*, can yield an account of the remainder—of the wreckage after full-fledged national utopias collapsed under the weight of history—that goes beyond a notion of “pure loss” that laments the disappearing of clearly differentiated political axes, and hits a theoretical impasse. This is a discourse of the remainder that draws its force from the consideration of the scatological remains left by the collapse of what Susan Buck-Morss (recovering Walter Benjamin) calls the “dreamworlds” of both the communist and the capitalist programs.

El luto humano sees the revolution in hindsight, decades after agrarian leaders Villa and Zapata held, for an ever-brief moment, a claim to power. The little fictional, nameless town in Revueltas’ novel is a symptomatic expression of the fate of the revolution after it fell in the hands of the bureaucratic apparatus that called itself revolutionary. Similar to Rulfo’s story, which was published only two years after, *El luto...* is a story of dispossession, betrayed revolutionary promises, and a hopeless exodus. Unlike Rulfo, Revueltas inscribes in his text the register of love that was an element of the violent storm that was the revolution. Natividad is the clearest expression of that love, and in his figure, betrayed and buried, we can read—if with the care and painstaking patience of the archeologist—an image of the utopian remainder

that will survive the catastrophe of the disappearance of the town, dormant in the ground until a future instance of danger and urgency recovers it.

Although it is unlikely that someone should mistake Revueltas' novel for a celebration of the utopian core of the Mexican Revolution, the fact remains that one cannot consider it a unqualified denunciation of the complete collapse of such utopia either. Natividad, as the personification of the political puissance of the revolution does not lose the force of his love and convictions; he is abated, not defeated, by the corrupted undercurrents of the post-revolutionary order. He only exists in the past, and from there, he projects his shadow onto the future of this wasteland that contains the seeds of its own moment of redemption. This is how this novel escapes the grip of the apocalyptic narrative. The present of the events narrated takes place in that moment of suspension that is described in the first pages as the true moment of death: not the last breath of the body, but the previous moment, when the certainty of the death sets in. As Chonita dies and the last inhabitants of the little town gather to mourn her, a storm breaks the bed of the river, flooding the land, and after a failed attempt to escape the rigor of the storm on foot, they all sit on a roof, already dead for all intents and purposes, but still able to reminisce.

In the Book of Revelation, this moment of suspension is described as a moment of silence that follows the breaking of the seventh seal; it is the sonorous equivalent of a clean slate and it is supposed to mark the clean separation of what-has-been—the historical concatenation of life on earth—and the new order. In *El luto...* the moment of silence, is not the herald of the new sun, and instead of abolishing the historical content of what-has-been, it is at this moment when the historical image surges in a collective evocation. The vultures circling the sorry group of peasants about to die make this stretched out instant scatologic but not eschatological. Which is to say that even if the passage illustrate the end of this particular group of characters and thus is an image of the last remnants of human animal life, it does not reproduce the logic of the judgement

and the cancellation of history as it happens in the biblical case. The *new man* that was suppose to inhabit the new sun established by the revolution is already dead; like Chonita, Natividad is a truncated promise, dead before his time. The scatological traces of the failed sun—the stillborn revolutionary sun—resist the imposition of the fantasy of the *tabula rassa*, which is a fundamental piece of the apocalyptic structure. The corpses of the peasants, of Natividad, the ruins of the town will remain as part of the natural history of the Mexican countryside, for the following generations to puzzle over and maybe to claim as their utopian inheritance.

This is the humble and fragmentary promise that the failed revolution extends to its progeny. And a few decades later, when the revolution had been all but defeated but the very same institutional mechanisms that sprouted out of itself, we find another account of the revolution and its utopian force, which serves of a counterbalance to Revueltas' novel, since it evokes more directly such force as it was congealed in the image of the Comuna de Morelos that was established by Emiliano Zapata.

— 3 —

The case of the Mexican Revolution is paradigmatic in more respects than one; it was the first popular revolution of the twentieth century, preceding the Russian one by seven years. The literature on it is as extensive as the range of its historical effects on the shaping of the Mexican region as well as the figure of influence that it represented for the rest of Latin America. Adolfo Gilly, wrote his *La Revolución interrumpida* (*The Mexican Revolution*, as it was titled in English) in 1971 from his prison cell in Lecumberri—also known as “El palacio negro”—the infamous prison for political prisoners that held within its walls Mexican historically relevant figures such as Pancho

Villa, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Ramón Mercader—Trotsky's assassin—, and José Revueltas. Gilly was convicted after participating in the general strike of the National University in 1968, and later released and exculpated in 1972.

Porfirio Díaz, the dictator that ruled over Mexico for nearly forty years from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, inaugurated Lecumberri early in the 1900s; Porfirio Díaz was also the main figure against which the Revolution was fought. The figure of Don Porfirio has come to symbolize the bourgeoisie elite that owned the better part of the country before the Revolution. Gilly writes very little about don Porfirio in his account of the Revolution; in fact, by the year of 1971 when *La revolución interrumpida* saw the light for the first time, all the information that is presented in Gilly's project was already known. The great contribution of Adolfo Gilly lies somewhere beyond historical documentation; his analysis recovers historic details and nuances of the many alliances and ruptures that gave the Revolution its complex thickness of significance.

Right from the start, it becomes apparent that Gilly's project is one of Trotskyist inflection, in the choice of the narrative framework that he chooses to relate the conflict between the bourgeoisie—that was given the right over enormous extensions of land by the Liberal government of President Benito Juárez— and the peasantry that resisted as fiercely as they were able to. Drawing from his Marxian formation, Gilly equals the process of dispossession of the land by violent means to the episode of the “enclosures” in European modern history; the author also considers these violations of communal ownership as the savage birth pangs of capitalism, this time in the Mexican context. However, this transition did not go smoothly.

Como había ocurrido en [otros] países, tampoco en México los campesinos cedieron sus tierras en paz. Los pueblos indios, aferrándose a su tradición, a su organización comunal ... resistieron, organizaron revueltas, fueron masacrados, volvieron sobre sus tierras para volver a ser rechazados a las

montañas... Para liquidar la propiedad comunal, [los liberales] tuvieron que acudir, contra los campesinos, a métodos violentos de apropiación y despojo; es decir, a los métodos bárbaros de la acumulación originaria capitalista en todas partes. Este proceso combinó las relaciones de producción capitalistas con formas y relaciones precapitalistas de dependencia de los peones hacia la hacienda (Gilly 21).⁹⁵

Francisco I. Madero declared war on the government of Porfirio Díaz on November 20th, 1910. He represented the petite bourgeoisie who opposed the Díaz's regime on the basis of its dictatorial character. Madero wanted to end the tight control that a reduced elite had of the fate of the whole nation; the air was charged with discontent and the urban revolutionary petite bourgeoisie found an ally in the already organized and mobilized peasant factions who demanded "Tierra y Libertad." The beginning of the Mexican Revolution had a relatively swift success in removing Porfirio Díaz from power, but that was as far as the common interests of all its different actors went. Beyond the end of the "porfiriato" the political program of Madero had little in common with that of the leaders of the massive agrarian mobilizations from North and South: Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

Many times was the revolutionary program to be reconfigured over the following decade, but the difference and later irreconcilability between peasant and urban revolutionaries remained unsolved. The core of these discrepancies can be summarized precisely in the ultimately unfulfilled promise of the agrarian socialist utopia. The demands of the peasants were echoed by some proletarian unions and parties that were after the same elusive ideals; as an example, Gilly remembers the manifesto of 1911 by

⁹⁵ As in these other countries, the peasants in Mexico did not peacefully give up their land. The Indian villages held fast to their tradition and communal forms of organization . . . They resisted, organized revolts, suffered massacres, and returned to their land only to be driven back into the mountains . . . In the struggle to liquidate the feudal structures of Church property . . . the bourgeoisie had to rely upon the barbaric methods of appropriation and plunder everywhere characteristic of primitive capitalist accumulation. In other words, it had to combine its own backward capitalist relations of production with other, still more primitive forms: pre-capitalist relations of peon-type dependence upon the hacienda.

the Partido Liberal Mexicano, which “called for ‘the abolition of the principle of private property’ and for the massive expropriation of the capitalist class by the arms, until a system was created where ‘land, houses, means of production, and transportation infrastructure is for communal use.” Gilly quotes the words of the manifesto saying,

...no hay que limitarse a tomar tan sólo posesión de la tierra y de los implementos de agricultura: hay que tomar resueltamente posesión de todas las industrias por los trabajadores de las mismas, consiguiéndose de esta manera que las tierras, las minas, las fábricas, los talleres, las fundiciones, los carros, los ferrocarriles, los barcos, los almacenes de todo género y las casas queden en poder de todos y de cada uno de los habitantes de México, sin distinción de sexo (116).⁹⁶

This was never to be, however, the program of the official revolutionary government with its long chain of short-lived presidents assassinated one after the other in waves of the opposing factions. But outside the walls of the capital, in the meantime, the fight of Villa’s “La división del norte” and Zapata’s “El ejército de liberación del sur” grew ever stronger with the collaboration of the mobilized peasantry, amassing enough power that the central revolutionary government had to acquiesce to their actions. By December 1914, the momentum gained by Zapata and Villa peaked and both armies entered Mexico city; the peasantry, finally, was at the neuralgic center of the nation. This encounter was the final gesture of the success of the agrarian revolution. But after a brief period of occupation and negotiations with the other factions, both armies went on to continue their military efforts outside of the capital. Villa and Zapata never planned on taking on the government themselves, both found their most fitting position to be in the country side, making the agrarian reform happen by their own hand.

⁹⁶ The task is not only to take possession of the land and the agricultural implements . . . but for the workers themselves to take firm possession of all industries. In this way they will ensure the land, mines, factories, workshops, foundries, coaches, railways, boats, stores of every kind, and houses remain in the possession of each and every inhabitant of Mexico, without distinction of sex.

After the departure from Mexico city, Zapata's army goes back to the leader's home state, Morelos, where at that juncture opens up one of the most fascinating episodes in Mexican history: The first successful socialist commune in Latin America. It is in the narration of the years of the commune, where Gilly's central contribution to the revolutionary historiography resides. The year 1971, when this book was published, is probably, along with 1968, one of the most significant years in Mexican recent history due to the highly active political life of the workers and the students. By revealing a new tributary in the well-known history of the Mexican Revolution using a socialist utopian image, Adolfo Gilly is winning back the Revolution for its popular base, thus marking its distance with the ossified official version of the revolution that the government of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) represented.

Éste es uno de los episodios de mayor significación histórica, más hermosos y menos conocidos de la revolución mexicana...Allí donde los campesinos y los obreros agrícolas finalmente establecieron su gobierno directo por un periodo, la revolución mexicana adquirió su carácter anticapitalista empírico. De ahí la larga conspiración del silencio o de la incomprensión acerca de este episodio crucial de la revolución. Pero no hay silencio ni deformación de la historia que pueda borrar lo que ha quedado en la conciencia colectiva a través de la propia experiencia revolucionaria. Vuelve a aparecer cada vez que sus portadores herederos se ponen de nuevo en movimiento, porque las conquistas de la experiencia y de la conciencia pueden quedar cubiertas y vivir subterráneamente por largos periodos, pero son de las que nunca se pierden (262).⁹⁷

⁹⁷ This was to be one of the finest and historically most important episodes of the Mexican Revolution.

The Morelos peasants practiced in their home state the true essence of the Ayala Plan: revolutionary liquidation of the latifundia . . . This empirically anti-capitalist character of the movement explains the conspiracy of silence with which bourgeois writers, and theoreticians of a revolution by stages, have surrounded this crucial development of the Mexican Revolution. Yet no conspiracy of

In this instance, as Benjamin recommends that the true materialist historian should, Gilly is doing more than reconstructing the events of history as they “really happened” (the zapatistas never called Morelos a commune, to be sure), he is recovering them in a moment of danger letting that lighting-bolt illuminate the past and project its promise onto the future. In the despair of the personal and political defeat, when after 1968 the force of the workers, peasants, and students was dissolved by persecution and government-ordered massacres, Gilly discovers for his reader that peasantry of Mexico *already* succeeded in creating a working utopia. And that socialist utopia was the subterranean stream that Gilly is tapping into to invigorate his own political struggle.

While there was, once again, murderous turmoil in the national capital in 1915, Zapata had already returned to Morelos with his army and began working on the agrarian partition. With the political spotlight pointing somewhere else, the zapatistas in the south “believe themselves the owners of their state of Morelos and consequently developed their peasant democracy” (262). They expropriated the sugar mills, which represented the stronger arm of capitalism in the region, to ran them collectively, and the land for farming was partitioned to communal ownership titles.

Zapata remained intransigent about the principles of their democracy; the main objective was to restore the communal ownership and collective working of the land according to the demands of the peasants. Whole armies of young professionals, mainly engineers, came from the city universities to contribute to the zapatista project, but they had to adapt their methods to the particular demands of the land and the people. Gilly relates an anecdote where Zapata warned the young civil engineers that they should not use those perfectly straight lines that they loved so much, and that they should respect the old idiosyncratic demarcation of the fields where crooked lines abounded, “even if takes years to complete the job this way.”

silence or deformation of history can blot out what this revolutionary experience has implanted in mass consciousness. It may remain hidden and submerged for a whole period, but it reappears with every new rise of the revolution.

According to Gilly, the Morelos Commune was not a mere historical regression to the circumstances previous to the violent dispossession of the land in the nineteenth century. Zapata aimed at recovering the ancient communal life that was in place even before the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century, while integrating new knowledge in order to survive in the then-current national and even international circumstances. This balancing act between history recovered and imagined future proved to be a complicated task. Gilly offers an example in the case of the choices that the peasants would make regarding their crops.

Dueños nuevamente de sus tierras, los campesinos tenían a volver a los cultivos de sustento: frijoles, garbanzos, maíz, hortalizas, o a la cría de pollos, productos fáciles de vender de inmediato en los mercados locales. Zapata mismo hizo una campaña para convencer a los campesinos, o a una parte al menos, de que no se limitaran al cultivo de verduras y sembraran caña para los ingenios, para lo cual se hicieron préstamos o entregas gratuitas de dinero y simiente. “Si ustedes siguen sembrando chile, cebollas y tomates, nunca saldrán del estado de pobreza en que siempre han vivido; por ello deben, como les aconsejo, sembrar caña”, les dijo a los campesinos de Villa de Ayala. Pero al parecer su éxito fue limitado. (267).⁹⁸

But any possibility of judging the success or failure of these efforts was in fact curtailed by the violent ending of the Morelos Commune. As early as in 1916 the government of Venustiano Carranza aimed at taking Morelos back from its autonomy,

⁹⁸ Having newly acquired their land, the peasants tended to revive the cultivation of subsistence-crops (kidney-beans, chick-peas, maize, vegetables) or the rearing of chicken—all of which could easily be sold on local markets. Zapata waged a campaign to convince at least some peasants that they should not merely grow vegetables but also plant cane for the sugar industry. In order to encourage this, he organized loans or grants of money and seed. ‘If you go on sowing chillies, onions and tomatoes,’ he told the peasants of Villa Ayala, ‘you will never escape the poverty in which you have always lived. So you ought to plant cane, as I have advised you.’ Yet he seems to have had only limited success, and the further evolution of the war made it possible.

and waged an intense war against Zapata. After three years of fighting, losing and winning back the control of Morelos, Zapata was assassinated on the 10th of March of 1919. Once their leader disappeared, the commune lost any possibility of subsistence given the debilitated state in which Carranza had left the zapatista army. However, with his death, the figure of Zapata grew from a well-respected agrarian leader, to the martyr of the peasants and the poor of Mexico, image that persists until these days.

In Mexico, the Morelos commune had no chance of becoming an exemplary experience to show the viability of this mode of socialist organization; it remained an experience restricted to one location, but as Gilly remarks, in that particular region it radically changed the economic, political, juridical and military bases of the social tissue. The commune proved possible a system in which the power is socialized, putting the pauperized peasant and the agrarian workers in charge of their own political and economical destinies.

The commune depended, to be sure, on the revolution in more general terms, and Gilly clarifies the many debts that Morelos had to different instances of the struggle: the generalized popular political awareness and mobilization, and the ideas coming from the cities, to mention just two. But at its core, the experience of Morelos was at the same time as unique as the particular circumstances present in that time and place. It was this “original and unique, original combination of the agrarian and industrial proletariat of the sugar mills with the peasant uprising based on the traditional social organization of the people, that dated from the ancient agrarian communities” (318-319).

The revolution had in Morelos its clearest, brightest pragmatic revolutionary moment; the experience there was guided by their own political leaders that had little to do with the more “official” positions of the revolutionaries from the cities. There was no theoretical decantation of this experience at the moment, and its existence inspired

more by the direct realization of a social utopia rather than by means of amassing a sound socialist theory of self-government.

La revolución del sur, confiando en sus tradiciones y experiencia y en sus dirigentes campesinos, no creyó en los políticos urbanos y se alzó sucesivamente contra Porfirio Díaz, Francisco I. Madero, Victoriano Huerta y Venustiano Carranza para defender su propia forma de gobierno y su ideal igualitario. Como los comuneros de París, los campesinos de Morelos “se alzaron a tomar el cielo por asalto”. Como no podían traducir ese impulso profundo en programas claros o en términos universales, lo materializaron en la organización de la vida social allí en donde establecieron su poder (322).⁹⁹

Which is not to say that there was no use for the “urban revolutionary intelligentsia that Morelos attracted from the city.” It was thanks to this “tenuous layer” of theorization that the peasant revolution had “the necessary resources to articulate in laws and public documents its aspirations and to make its voice resound in the rest of the nation.” And that voice was still speaking out for the following decades, in such a way that by the end of the 1930s when the most substantial land reform took place, Morelos was the state where the largest proportion of land had already been given back to the peasants.

La Comuna de Morelos, primer gobierno de los campesinos y los obreros en América Latina, es la tradición más profunda y más hermosa legada

⁹⁹ The southern masses based themselves upon their own traditions and peasant leaders rather than petty-bourgeois city politicians; and that they rose up not only against the dictatorial political regimes of Porfirio Díaz and Huerta, as Madero and Carranza also did, but against capitalist property and bourgeois society. Like the Paris communads, they ‘threw themselves into an assault on the heavens’.

At this time, there were no antecedents, no workers’ states to provide them with examples, a programme and support. Unable to codify their anti-capitalist conclusion in clear programmes and texts, they expressed it in the organization of society wherever they assumed power.

por esta interrumpida revolución para la posteridad del pensamiento, la vida y las luchas de los trabajadores y los pobres de México (323).¹⁰⁰

The historical relation between Revueltas' and Gilly's projects is a intricate one, they both respond to a crisis to which they are direct witnesses, and they both go to the trace of history of the revolution—albeit to different moments of such history—to claim it as part of their political inheritance. They both were incarcerated at El Palacio de Lecumberri, and wrote important works there. And the most significance coincidence between them is the resistance they showed to embracing the apocalyptic structure to make sense of the political landscape around them. They picked up and continued the concatenation of utopian fragmentary images congealed in flashes of danger and urgency.

— 4 —

“Dreamworld and catastrophe,” Susan Buck-Morss tells us in her book of the same title, are the two sides of the utopian coin, so to speak; the cipher of the 20th century was the construction and later deflation of the twin promises that Communism and Capitalism set out to accomplish: to attain the utopian state of “a social world in alliance with personal happiness” based on the “overcoming of scarcity for all” (Buck-Morss *Dreamworld and Catastrophe the Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West ix*). Even though 1989 marked the beginning of the dissolution of the bipolar logic that separated East and West into two parallel ideological rails, even from before the ominous date it was possible to see that the two systems had relied on a conception of progress, which

¹⁰⁰ The Morelos Commune, the first attempt at workers' and peasants' power in Latin America, is the finest and most deeply rooted tradition which can serve for the continuation of Mexico's peasants' government.

established more similitudes among them than they cared to acknowledge. This notion of progress as a constant and powerful advance towards the goal of a utopian state of final abundance and social-personal harmony, revealed to bore with it the risk of being “used instrumentally by structures of power, and mobilized as an instrument of force that turns against the very masses who it [was] supposed to benefit” (xi).

As the world witnessed in ascending alarm the pragmatic outcome of these sister utopias in the form of ecological devastation, political terror and persecution, and the steepening of the worker’s exploitation, there was a generalized revision of the value of such transcendental images which had guided mass social projects in the better part of the past century. One possibility was, to be sure, the negation of any further validity of utopia as a political goal, which would imply to negate as well the hope in political investment at the core of the utopian formulation. Susan Buck-Morss, suggests a different venue, in her project; after recognizing that seen the scope of devastation that the catastrophic side of utopia has translated into, “to continue the same dream into the future...would be nothing less than suicidal,” she clarifies that “these catastrophic effects need to be criticized in the name of the democratic, utopian hope to which the dream gave expression, not as a rejection of it” (xiv).

This hope that is found in the elaboration of a utopian image has its cause in the very concrete perception of a pressing necessity that remains unfulfilled by the *status quo*. In other words, it is in the shortcomings of a given system that hope and utopia are born, not in the higher or lower chances that such image has of becoming real. In the wake of the Cold War, the conditions of lack, the shortcomings of both communism and capitalism, continue to be in need of restoration, then utopia continues to be pertinent, even if not more likely to be achieved. The force of this perceived pressing necessity, in turn, comes from its concrete material nature.

Utopia, abstractly considered, is relatively easy to trump by clever—though already weary—discursive strategies that theoretically undermine its value as being

“proved dangerous” by the historical instances of its deployments. It is harder to do so in pragmatic terms; if we consider the unwavering material acuteness of the suffering that is at the origin of utopia, we would have to concede that after the falling flat of past dreamworlds, it is their ruins which claim ever so pressingly the re-elaboration of a redemptory imaginary—understood as sensorial—device. The devastation of the environment, the tyrannical rule of the logic of exchange value that continues to operate in sharp contrast with the absolute dispossession of the poor, all of these are material bodily expressions of the catastrophe that motivates Enrique Dussel’s and Michael Löwy’s efforts to rehabilitate utopia in Latin America. The following discussion of these intellectual elaborations will trace the bodily, sensorial nodes of suffering that they engage.

In 1988, Enrique Dussel published his *Hacia un Marx Desconocido*, where he read the so-called “second draft” of Marx’s *Capital*. Later into that same line of research, Dussel had the opportunity to consult the very manuscripts that preceded 1866, that is, the beginning of the writing of *Das Kapital*, discovering a intermediate draft: the manuscripts of 1863-1865. This discovery and the commentary that unfolded, crowned Dussel’s long-expanding project of a reinterpretation of Marx beyond its “official” reception.

Best known for his conjuring of a productive encounter of theology and politics in his “philosophy of liberation,” Dussel has dedicated the better part of his career to explain spiritual and pragmatic redemption as one and the same. And the central figure that makes this hinging possible is the dispossessed. The dispossessed occupy a special place in the Christian account of salvation; often times taken conveniently to hold a figurative meaning, the poor have been “explained” by the Catholic church to be “the poor at heart,” regardless of the class to which one belongs; Dussel challenges this “poetic” interpretation and makes an exegetical effort to recover the bodily nature of the pauperism alluded by the Scripture. The particular mode of existence and

perpetuation of the material conditions of the dispossessed is explained best in the capitalist age by Karl Marx: "Capital is dead labor that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and it lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (Marx and Engels 257).

A Marx for the 21st century, for Dussel, is only viable if re-evaluated and reprogramed as the pragmatic-minded theoretical elaboration of the mechanisms of oppression that continue to command the logic of the economic system in which the better part of the world lives. Latin America presents in this context a perfect location for the execution of this reshaping of Marxism; it is "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population [that] signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation" (Marx and Engels 823).

Zeroing in on this mark, Dussel describes Marx as "the philosopher and economist, who critically deconstructs capitalist economics and reconstructs it anthropologically and ethically, in a democratic vision in which the responsible and participating individual is fully realized in the community and in solidarity" (Dussel 12). This reconstruction would come from the revolutionary drive that Dussel is interested in maintaining from the more classical understanding of Marxian theory, and it would be shepherded by a utopian image, one in which "the responsible and participating individual is fully realized." This interpretation would fit the social necessities of the "periphery" that continues to get the shorter end of the globalized economy. Dussel is not interested in salvaging a Marx for the twenty-first century that could be registered back into the Euro-centric tradition; this is Marxian theory of the dispossessed, by and for those in need of "liberation" from their current oppressive conditions.

The strong hold of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America, to which Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation is germane, draws from a centuries-long relation of a particular affluent of Christianity, that represented by the missionaries during the Spanish conquest and colonization, that was inherited by the grass-roots church communities that function mainly among the indigenous peasantry in Latin America. Race and class mark these communities as the poorest of the poor in a geopolitical region that is engaged into a logic of "dependent-capitalism." In this context, the discourse of Dussel is not as unusual as it could be in the North American-European political or intellectual contexts, for example.

This liberated/liberating philosophy continues this disciplinary breaching into a sublated reality, and beyond its own redefinition. Liberation for Dussel would betray its nature if it were to be understood as something short from absolute utopian realization. In this conjunction, philosophy of liberation reveals (and even recognizes and discusses) its debt to the contemporary re-elaborations of the teachings of the Abbot of Fiore. In the late twelfth century, the friar Joachim di Fiore went into a inspiration rapt and wrote his three best-known works in the period of one year; among them, an illustrated commentary to the Apocalypse of Juan of Patmos. This commentary included some "figurae" in which the Italian monk proposed his own vision of the Great Time; three main ages arranged the progress of history, each one governed by a different divine persona. The first, the age of the Father commenced with the creation and ended with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; to this one, it followed the age of the Son, which expanded until (according to some interpretations) the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The age of the Son was to be signaled by constant tribulations and struggles that were to finish when the age of the Spirit was realized. The third age was explicated as the coming of the Kingdom, only the cipher of this particular utopia was not to be attained by a flight into the heavenly realm; the Kingdom was to be an immanent social utopia (Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 19). As a

token of good will, Joachim di Fiore established his own version of a utopian society in the form of a new religious order, the Joachites, whom lived under the ethical precepts of “the new man,” the *bona fide* inhabitant of the Kingdom to come.

Henri de Lubac and Marjorie Reeves in the French and English contemporary contexts, have undertaken the monumental effort of tracing the intellectual, theological, and revolutionary influence of the teachings of the Abbot of Fiore; Ernst Bloch also dedicates a section of the second volume of his *The Principle of Hope* to the “mystical democracy” imagined by di Fiore. Bloch tells us that “Joachim’s chosen few are the poor, and they are to go to paradise in the living body, not just as spirits,” since this paradise will be verified on earth, in the form of a classless society. In the pages dedicated to di Fiore in *The Principle of Hope* the image of the exodus comes back again as the theme of the sermons of the Joachites, an exodus “from fear and servitude or the Law and its state . . . so Joachim’s doctrine with its band of brothers, is not a flight from reality into heaven and the other world” (Bloch 511).

Dussel preserves the Joachite centrality of the poor, and the metaphor of the liberation in the exodus from Egypt. The metaphor is renovated as a narrative device that compares the specific historical conditions of the Jews in Egypt to the current conditions of the Latin American poor. For the image of the liberation to be thoroughly effective, it must foretell the existence of the promised land, the utopian moment that will give the revolutionary drive its pulse. A glimpse into the utopian promised land does not fulfill any need by itself, but by offering a counterpoint to the present condition, it can trigger the revolutionary effort, and both Utopia and present factual conditions are central to this effort.

There is an essential link between accepting the tension of the “already” and the “not yet” and the material reality of the poor. For as the oppressed, the product of injustice, the poor reveal in their very misery the necessity of the coming of that infinite fulfillment of all the

insufficiencies of history that is the Kingdom. The reality of the poor makes us discover the reality of the Kingdom's "not yet;" at the same time it prevents any fetishization of the Kingdom's "already" and thus gives the Kingdom the necessary dialectical flexibility for making both faith and hope still possible... (Dussel and Mendieta)

Faith and hope are actualized out of a eschatological consideration of the social wants. Hunger and poverty are turned into the kind of "political dynamite" that Benjamin sought into the reading of the debris of history. The negation or the negligent attention to the side of the oppressed makes a system (be it social, political, or intellectual) complicit with the oppressor, and in Dussel's terms, a sinner, and the sin is the defense of the capital.

Any historical claim to be "a society without poverty" is central to the reality of capitalism, for capitalism tends to think that it has done away with poverty in Europe and the United States—because the system produces its poor away from the centre in the underdeveloped periphery. Thus the dialectic of "already" and "not yet" allows us to secularize any idolatrous vision of the present stage of capitalism and to give a place in history to the liberation goals of the oppressed peoples and classes (Dussel and Mendieta 86).

Thus, Latin America is in urgent need for a reformulation of the utopian possibility that would preserve the hope and the faith, and with them, the possibility of effective political intervention against capitalism. Philosophy of liberation works on the dialectical historical movement that departing from a present moment of danger, sees in the past an image in which to find its reflection and the encouragement for recovering the hope for redemption that the present and the past working in this fashion, can project onto the future. This future, for Dussel, is a radical rupture with the past, à la Fiore; is a liberation that is political utopia just as much as it is divine redemption.

"Liberation" implies a relation with a previous term (*ex quo*), from where? from prison. The "prison" is at the same time (*because it is the same thing*) the system of oppression and sin... The current moral theologies (those mentioned before) do not radically question the first "land" (the "old man;" in Latin america the *present* system of oppression, today, is dependent capitalism), because they do not set up as the necessary horizon of *all* their discourse the utopia of the future "land" (the new man"), everything they deal with in their treaties is reformist morality, in the land of the Chaldeans, in Egypt. They will never "go out" into the desert, nor will they receive, in the desert, the "new" law (the "new" norms of morals) (Dussel and Mendieta 141).

Where does the necessary force for such a radical change come from in this account? It comes from a consideration of the other as pure externality, so that the "same" the *ex quo* cannot ingest it and subsume it. Such exteriority is pragmatic and not abstract, it does not mean utter "strangeness" or unknowability, but a concrete unsalvageable residual nature. Hunger and poverty cannot and will not ever be able to be dialectically "ingested" by the system in order to be sublated; as long as the capitalist system survives in any shape or form, the poor will be its corollary, its intrinsic excrescence. Hunger has an "analectical" rather than "dialectical" relation to capitalism, in the sense that explains Dussel, of "what traverses the logic" forcing it into an utter transformation.

We face here a completely different logic than that of the "other" as it is more widely understood in contemporary academia. Alberto Moreiras would insist, and not without reason, on the exhaustion of culturally identifiable differences in an age of capitalist "cultural in-differentiation;" poverty and oppression on the other hand, have not been exhausted by the global expansion of capitalism, they have been boosted. Utopia continues to be necessary to uphold as long as the alternative system whose

existence or relevance is not measured by its ease of attainment, but by the suffering that goes on unmitigated in the old system.

The new system is an analogical realization, which includes something of the old system (*similitudo*) and something absolutely new (*distinctios*).

The new system was impossible for the old one, there is creation in the bursting in of the analectical otherness of the poor in their own liberation.

The method of the ethics of liberation is analectic, because it is an element in the creative action of the unconditioned freedom of God and the redemptive act of the subsumption in Christ of the flesh (the system) by the analectic irruption of the Word, the negation of sin and the building of the Kingdom (Dussel and Mendieta 144).

Joachim di Fiore's imprint is clear in this formulation; the new system is nothing but an update of the Time of the Spirit, the era of the perfect harmony that modern philosophy has been announcing in different shapes at different moments. We can read Hegel's absolute manifestation of the spirit of reason, or Nietzsche's "new man" or Marx's communist utopia as germane elaborations. What sets Dussel's "Third Kingdom" apart is its politics. Not only is it a political alternative coming from philosophy in a time of a draught in political engagement among Latin American intellectuals, but its particular politics come from a different place than those of Hegel or even Nietzsche's, namely, from the remainders of a collapsing system. It escapes the fetishism of progress and takes strength in the weaknesses and the excremental; it sides with the pauper, the loser, the destitute.

— 5 —

In 1524 in today's Germany, Thomas Müntzer, an anabaptist rebel priest led a peasant revolution that crystalized into a peasant commune that lasted for about one year. To the cry of *Omnia sunt communia*, the peasantry resisted not only the Catholic church, and even Luther, but above all, the advance of the movement of the enclosures, which marked the dawn of the capitalist era. Along with Luther, he criticized the centralized abuse of power of Rome, but they had important disagreements regarding the political mobilization that Müntzer believed necessary to advance the will of god on earth. In this short-lived version of a utopian society, the uprisen peasantry seemed to echo, from more than a three-century distance, the teaching of Joachim di Fiori and his Joachites. They dissolved the town council and established a new one that democratically elected men and women as their direct representatives, which decided on all communal matters, following the "word of god" and believing to be living his Kingdom on earth. In 1525, Thomas Müntzer leading 8000 peasants were contained, defeated, tortured, and finally executed by the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities.

The mark of Müntzer's peasant revolution, however, was not at all forgotten, as he was recovered by Marxist philosophy as one of the precursors of communist revolutionary struggles as acts of resistance against capitalism. According to the historical account of capitalism as it appears in *Das Kapital*, the primitive accumulation began by the seizing of the land of the small peasant owners, to be concentrated in the hands of a proto-capitalist elite that turned the peasantry into wage-laborers. Engels reflected on Müntzer's revolt in the wake of the failed Revolution of 1848 in an essay published a couple of years after the fact. Peasants represent, in the Marxian scheme, a historical forerunner of the proletariat, and the enormous amount of suffering that the

episode of the enclosures inflicted on Europe (and in a different sense to Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia) were read as the birth pangs of capitalism, and excremental and transitory episode that marked the dawn of a new era.

Latin America, in turn, has had its fair share of peasant revolutionary movements, dating back as far as the sixteenth century and still taking place at the beginning of the twenty-first. It has often being the case, just as in Müntzer's rebellion, that in Latin America, the peasant uprisings have being the revolutionary response to the expropriation of the land by a capitalist elite, and they have been consistently inspired, supported, or galvanized by a particular faction of the Catholic church that understands its theological responsibility to ameliorate the conditions of those who suffer by an oppressive system of production.

Michael Löwy was born in Brazil of Jewish-Austrian descent, and although he has lived the better part of his life between Paris and Israel, he continues to have strong academic and political bonds with Latin America. One of the most consistent lines in his work is the tracing of the marriage between politics and religion; referred to the Latin American context, Löwy has produced important texts that provide a historical view of as well as a sound philosophical reflection on the religious and Marxist liaisons that Latin American revolutionary movements hold.

In many aspects, Löwy's work is close to that of Enrique Dussel; they both recognize and valorize the theological component of the particular brand of Marxism that emerges in the region, on the peasant context more often than in the urban one. However, there seems to be more of critical distance between the theological precepts that these movements uphold and the personal theological position in Löwy than there is on Dussel. This is a logic result of their different disciplinary and biographical subject positions, to be sure; Löwy is not a theologian and he does not rely on biblical exegeses to defend the validity of his claims, in turn, Löwy is a less invasive commentator of the work of others. His book *Fire Alarm*, on Walter Benjamin's theses *On the Concept of*

History is a perfect prove of the well-synchronized reading of the German philosopher along with examples close to Löwy (such as the Theology of Liberation) without one overwhelming the other.

Löwy has been personally involved in Brazil's Movement of the Landless Rural Workers, and in so doing he has come in direct contact with the bodily ailments that plague both the impoverished rural workers as well as the land that they cannot own. The MST (for its initials in Portuguese) gained relevance in both the Brazilian and the broader Latin American contexts during the last several years; it comprehend thousands of peasants that either have no land or have only small plots which they destined for household farming. Their collective effort goes against one of the most unfair wealth distribution system in the world, and more specifically, against Neoliberalism which threatens to make an already extreme situation into a worse version of itself. In "The socio-religious origins of Brazil's landless rural workers movement," Löwy advances the argument that even though currently the MST runs on decidedly secular and non-denominational program, it is indebted in its origins to the churches that championed its cause in a first moment. These origins in the church granted the movement an accompanying Marxian rhetoric; Löwy discusses an example of a document that dates back to the 70s titled "The Cry of the Churches" that concludes that

"Capitalism must be defeated: it is the greatest evil, the accumulated sin, the rotten root, the tree that produces all these fruits which we know so well: poverty, hunger, disease, death...For this reason, we must pass beyond private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, commerce, banks)." (Löwy 34).

As corollary to this Marxian understanding of the political experience of the dispossessed in Latin America, the Liberation Theology consensus was to stop considering the poor as victims that would deserve charitable compassion but that

intrinsically were unable to defend their own lot; rather, they were now considered the natural “actors in their own liberation” (Löwy 34). In line with the tradition of di Fiore–Müntzer–Marx–Dussel, Löwe also recovers the millenarism that runs deep in these revolutionary movements; liberation christianity also conceived a “social-religious utopia of the ‘Kingdom of God,’ not as a transcendent quality projected into another world, but as a new society here on earth, one based on love, justice, and freedom,” at the same time that it avoids the trap of the fetishization of this utopian image. It accomplishes this by making it clear that the access to the Kingdom is by no means guaranteed, but will come “as the result of a long march-caminhada is the Brazilian word-toward the Promised Land, following the biblical model of the Exodus” (Löwy 35).

Löwy suggests the term “mystique” instead of millenarism to describe the particular mixture of secularized redemption that the MST shares with other liberation movements. He takes the words of Eric Hobsbawm to state that they such social expressions should not be “considered solely as ‘a touching survival from an archaic past,’ but as a cultural force that remains active, in another form, in modern social and political movements,” and that at the right conjunction can be activated and channeled as the base political effectiveness to mark the said movement with the “burning confidence in a new world, and that generosity of emotion which characterizes it even in its most primitive..forms” (Löwy 38).

This stubborn faith in the coming of a new society “different from capitalism”—the lay equivalent of the “Kingdom”—does not prevent the MST from acting with a perfectly modern rationality... This successful synthesis of utopia and realism has undoubtedly contributed to making the Landless Rural Workers Movement not only the organized expression of the struggle of the poor of the countryside for a radical agrarian reform, but also the central reference for all the forces of Brazil's “civil society”—

unions, churches, left parties, professional and academic associations—which struggle against neoliberalism (Löwy 39).

Löwy understanding of the position of the peasantry depends on a valorization of the scatologic remnant as the source for political revolutionary energy. But it is not the same kind of scatology (or not valued in the same fashion) at play in the Marxian consideration of the peasant as excremental; while for the former, poverty is the excremental with political possibilities, for the latter, the particular poverty of the peasant is superseded by the greater revolutionary potential of the poverty of the industrial proletariat. The political mobilization of the landless peasants in Brazil, as it documented in *Terra*, is a good example of how this value can be derived from a situation of crisis, where the conditions of possibility of a community are fractured and threatened.

Even though Sebastião Salgado embraces an apocalyptic approach in the narrative framework in which he inscribes his photographs, the visual compositions reveal a utopian remnant in the relation between the people and the land, when read against and not through said narrative framework. The land is both the *raison d'être* of the rural workers and the tool that has been denied to them; the land is the context and the object of the struggle that has been going on at a national level in Brazil for decades now. And although the suggested continuities among the land and its inhabitants is done with a heavy hand by Salgado, the spatial disposition of the human subjects on the terrain suggest that (even though that relation is not beyond social-determination) there is a space for them to arrange themselves following more organic patterns compared to the urban grid. The promise of the land, which is deviated when it turns to wasteland, is that of a more just and direct relation between the worker and the material world he is affecting with his labor. The work on the land, unlike that of the factory worker, is difficult to be conceived as disarticulated individual tasks, rather, the cultivation of the land or even cattle breeding favors cooperation among the workers.

The religious sense that underlies the lives of rural communities as we have seen repeated in most of the authors cited in this section, can be understood as the political mobilization resulting from the collectively perceived threat to the material context that brings these communities together in the first place (religious=*religare*).

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Finally, the case of Matilde Sánchez needs to be addressed separately from Revueltas and Salgado. If the tensions between the urban and rural images are noticeable in the work of all three of these authors, Sánchez is the one that most decidedly urban of them. Her unnamed narrator holds an observing post in the city and describes the *campo* from there and mainly through the eyes of a third party. Elena, the protagonist, and her sister Carmen own the land of the family farm, but they are rural renegades. They reject the reception of their cultural inheritance, at least for a long time during their youth, and they strike a pose of urbanites which already puts them, and the narration that reproduces their particular vantage point, in a different category than *El luto humano* and *Terra*.

In *El desperdicio*, the countryside is not threatened by a crisis from the beginning, but it is nevertheless a figure of contention for the protagonist. The image of *el campo* evoked by Sánchez is the place of the arrested promise to the future of its productivity, just like the other two works, but what sets it apart is the fact that it is the protagonist who voluntarily produces that interruption of her own relationship to the countryside. She never abandons her bourgeois individual subjectivity in favor of a communal coexistence with the land and its people. The adolescent rebellion staged by the Arteché sisters consisted in repudiating an inheritance that they did not fully

understand. The rest of the life of Elena, after leaving Pirovano for Buenos Aires, will be a slow return to the elusive image of the land of her origin. But this return could not have taken place were it not for the mediation of crisis and the simultaneous fragmentation, and dissolution of the personal and the national subjectivities of Elena and Argentina.

It is only at the end of the novel that we see Elena as a dispossessed character. After being given the diagnostic of the cancer that would lead her to the grave, she confesses that she feels as though everything has been taken from her, although it is not clear who would be doing the taking in this case. Elena left and came back to a land that she never deciphered, first rejecting it, and then failing to claim it back as hers. And throughout her periplos back to the familial locus, she could not figure out how to produce in her own terms, so when she goes back to Pirovano, she returns a barren character to claim a barren land. And for a while this coincident moment of crisis gives Elena the opportunity of contemplating the landscape around her and to be interested in the problems that plagued it, listening to the signs, and trying to discern ominous patterns that would reveal the face of the future catastrophe. But a few short years after, informed about her own imminent demise, Elena stops looking for clues in the landscape and the ways of the rabbit hunters, and she is only able to see herself as consubstantial to the wasteland that unfolds in front of her eyes.

There is a fundamental equivocation, a misunderstanding on which Elena operates as a character throughout the novel. She thinks metonymically about the land and her rural inheritance. She does not see the farm and the land as the conditions of possibility of her own escape to the city, she does not see how *el campo* defines her in ways that she is not aware of yet when she abandons it. Elena believes that she can cleanly extract herself from the immutable landscape of the land only because she has made the mistake of equating the countryside with the idiosyncrasies of her parents that she finds exasperating. This leaves a more comprehensive look on the rural landscape

unexplored, and the risk of doing so is that Elena brings with her the core of that incomprehension, that splinter of the land that she bears in her urban life, thus perpetuating the ideological content behind the idiosyncrasies she rejected.

Repression and faith in progress are two instances of the manifestation of the undigested image of the rural life that Elena assimilates without much reflection. Sure, she theorizes about repressed texts, repressed sexualities and ideas, but she (and the narrator) fail to acknowledge *la represión* that is displayed everyday before her eyes by the military junta, which has the purpose of securing the economic survival of the status quo, of which the Arteché's farm would necessarily benefit. But this material relationships of dependence and conditions of possibility fall beyond the register that Elena is able (or willing) to decode in her youth. The novel suggests that Elena spent one of the most politically dynamic decades in the recent history of Argentina theorizing and exercising a form of cultural alienation that was supposed to legitimize her place in the social tissue of the city. In this trope of alienation, of de-familiarization is where we find the key element to read Elena as a character, not so much as *un desperdicio* as is the position of the author, but as the pivotal character who never came in direct contact with the material reality around her. Even though the idea that she builds of her farm for her friends in the city is peppered with references to the direct physical—and mostly violent—manipulation of animal life, the authors of those acts are the servants, and later the rabbit hunters; Elena's role, however remains to describe such acts with more or less interpretative intervention, but she never is materially implicated in these activities.

The faith in progress of Elena's parents manifested itself in the tin silos they erected and the dresses, handbags and luxury cars that the mother flaunted around, and to this superfluous display, Elena and her sister responded with a mocking sophomoric attitude. But the ideological core of that particular conviction was successfully passed on to the next generation. Elena is also a fervent believer in the ultimate beneficial

character of progress, as it is evident in her assessment of the symptoms of crisis that she follows and registers in her last years back in Pirovano. She is fascinated with the emergence of the practice of rabbit-hunting, but her fascination does not curb her conviction that such practices are regressive, and that the civilized world is woefully losing the battle with the resurgence of barbarism in the midst of the countryside.

In the case of this novel, the ending is so somber because both the narrator and the protagonist cling to the fantasy of completeness (a narcissist fantasy *par excellence*) that is menaced by the crisis of production affecting Elena's writing and the agricultural yielding. The economic catastrophe of 2001 that serves as a backdrop to the diagnosis of Elena's cancer is described in the novel from a completely fatalistic perspective; even when the text mentions the moments of improvisation and political mobilization brought about by strategies of revaluation of marginal objects and activities, the narrative voice fails to see any glimpse of hope in them.

Sánchez uses the economic debacle to magnify the personal misfortune of a tone-deaf character that fails to recognize the importance of the material conditions of her own existence. For Elena, the world ended when she was certain of her imminent death; for Sánchez, to tie together the fates of Argentina and of Elena Arteché means to embrace the kind of apocalyptic despair that characterizes the reactionary middle and upper classes in contemporary Argentina. The land will remain a wasteland as long as it is not yielding cattle and grains (and the government is not taxing them), and it is being misused by the unemployed to survive by retrograde means like rabbit-hunting. All of which is completely coherent with the unwavering bourgeois position of the narrative voice: to see only one disaster, one wasteland without hope where new (minor, not-bourgeois) forms of organization rise from the pile of wreckage to respond to a moment of danger and urgency.

Conclusion

The Remainder Revisited

What the previous pages wanted to display was the diversity of directions and strategies that cultural producers can take when working with the image of waste, as well as some of the possibilities of analysis that scholars and critics can engage when exploring the work of those producers. The purpose of the analysis has been the discernment of patterns that could yield some inkling into questions about contemporary politics and historical imagination in Latin America as displayed in works of art and fiction. Out of the analysis of this patterns comes a constellation of attributes associated with the remainder, which serves to distill a reworked conceptual image of the remainder in the following terms: The remainder proves to be *anti-apocalyptic* despite appearing often in the midst of a *crisis*, it marks a moment of *shared vulnerability*; its operation on the individual subjectivity is *anti-narcissist* because of its fragmentary and *fracturing character*, and in that fragmentary nature, the remainder finds the *mutability* necessary for its historical *persistence*. The remainder as theme and structure opens the possibility of a flexible and dynamic exploration of one of the tropes that seems to be repeated often in academic assessments of the contemporary politics of the region—from the broken promises of an entrenched left that was supposedly defeated beyond hope by the 1990s, to the economic collapses revealed as the real yielding of the splendid promises of the neoliberal policies of that same decade. What both the politics of a left of Marxist inspiration and the doctrine of a predatory free market economics share is the importance of not straying from a set, all-encompassing program, which must be trusted and implemented thoroughly lest it fails to deliver its ultimate promise. Once both otherwise diametrically opposed programs collapsed,

however, what is left in their wake is a situation of crisis that has lost the systematic consistency of the model previously in place, but that also preserves fractured pieces of it. And out of these excremental fragments, as we have seen, come instances of improvised collective organization of those who have been forced to find means of survival in the wreckage. This basic need for survival is what exposes the ineffective character of the fantasy of apocalyptic thinking. Only the reorganizing drive of the fragments of any wreckage makes survival possible, and such adaptation is incompatible with the notion of a *tabula rasa*. This is why the remainder is inherently anti-apocalyptic.

We have also seen that the remainder is thematized in cultural products in the context of a crisis. Marcelo Cohen and Matilde Sánchez take the financial collapse of Argentina in 2001 as the motivation for their novels; José Revueltas, Guadalupe Nettel and Teresa Margolles thematized the violence of dispossession on Mexico as a constant throughout the twentieth century and affecting the rural as well as the urban contexts; in the case of Brazil, Vik Muniz, Rubem Fonseca, and Sebastião Salgado show us images of a national landscape scarred by poverty existing along obscene luxury; while Rodolfo Walsh and Artur Barrio used the power of the image of tortured bodies to denounce the violence of the dictatorships of the region in the 1970s.

Its association to contexts of crisis makes the image of the remainder a mark of a moment of collective vulnerability. With the possible exception of *El desperdicio* by Matilde Sánchez, there is a coincidence of the presence of collectives in danger and their mobilization around an image of waste. Consider the workers at Jardim Gramacho and their relation to the dump, the squatters at the Hidulya Mansion and Yónder Nágaro, the small army of homeless men and women led by Zé Galinha to use their bodily filth as protest in the center of Rio de Janeiro, the band of hopeless peasants waiting for death at the roof of that fictional little town written by Revueltas, or the tens of thousands of displaced peasants struggling for land to work in Brazil. In all of these

cases, the different collectives go through the shared experience of imminent danger that threatens their basic subsistence. Whether they were a collective before the crisis revealed itself or their shared vulnerability made them into a collective, the responses portrayed in these works often take the shape of a horizontally organized structure.

The *catadores* of Jardim Gramacho went to the garbage dump as individuals looking for alternatives to unemployment, and they stayed despite the danger and suffering that those mountains of putrid matter beget, mainly because there they could escape the yoke of a boss and the constraints of a working schedule that separated the productive activities from the social and the familial ones. Kathleen Millar points out that it is the greater flexibility and an elusive sense of freedom that makes the backbreaking task of selecting recyclable materials worthwhile. In this case, garbage is at once generative and excremental; it provides the *catadores* with a means of economic survival, but it also threatens their physical and emotional health every day. Out of concern for this shared vulnerability, they decided to get organized as a self-governing workers' association.

The remainder is necessarily conditioned by a perishability that affects its productive value; its time is fleeting and its disposition is never whole. These two traits that are easily observable in the life cycle of garbage seem to extend to the mobilized collectives they affect. The *catadores* of Jardim Gramacho work surrounded by rotting matter, salvaging non perishable materials whose exchange-value, although marginal, is not fully depleted. Their work entails seeing plastic and metal as indistinct parts of the ever-growing pile that they carry to the selling points at the end of the day; those little mountains, just like the big one—a *mãe rampa*—will never be complete, but merely arbitrarily interrupted.

Vik Muniz's work's most violent intervention in the circumstances of these workers is the fundamentally altering effect his portraits had on the materials and the subjects he used, for what the pictures of garbage did was force the hand of the material

and make them evoke a narcissist fantasy of completeness. Instead of an indistinct pile, they were arranged perfectly to suggest not just an image of completeness of a human body or a whole staged scene, but they reproduced well-known images belonging to the rarefied realm of art. Instead of being the means for the survival of the *catadores* as it was on the dump, the photographed garbage spoke the language of art and mythology and other a-historical traditions that remain beyond the orbit of the experience of the workers. Their portraits, mediated by metamorphosed trash, said nothing of their quotidian experience of fragmentation, and danger, and urgency; instead, they were merely a reflecting pool for the art world to self-congratulate for its own cleverness in instilling great amounts of value—and not just the marginal one that the *catadores* exploit—back into worthless materials. Although garbage can be manipulated into a narcissist image, this can only happen by taking it out of its immediate context and stripping it down from its materiality (smell and perishability, mainly). Actual garbage resists narcissistic integration into a permanent coherent whole, simply by virtue of its defining traits.

Additionally, Muniz's engagement of the workers of Jardim Gramacho also violated their collective character. The artist selected seven out of the several hundred of *catadores* working in the dump to perform the role of a model, which is a passive, individual position to hold, and thus is the absolute opposite to the work they do daily. As the work of Kathleen Millar suggests, the precarious balance of the *catadores* association was radically interrupted after their foray into the orbit of the art market. Zumbí who appears as a sower in his portrait, and who was a founding member of the association, abandoned it as did Carlão soon after Muniz's project was done.

The fate of the association shows the fragility of the self-organized mobilizations that owe their existence to a practice of improvisation and informality, as it is often the case of collectives organized around a perceived shared vulnerability. Nevertheless, the precedent of the association of *catadores* of Jardim Gramacho will remain, and it will be

available for future iterations to be reclaimed as part of the tradition of informal workers' collective mobilizations. Just as Tião, the president of the association, reclaimed the experience of his grandfather, the union leader, and re-articulated it under a new set of circumstances. The undeniable advantage of even a fractured and failed political organization is that its seed can lie dormant under the direst of situations to be re-activated in a future moment of danger and urgency.

The remainder as organic experience

To say that the remainder is conditioned by the time of its perishability places it squarely on the realm of organic life. Be it in the form of garbage, human remains or wastelands, the remainder always points to the most basic conditions of possibility that determine the human animal's subsistence, as well as social and political subjectivity. Being live matter, it is only logical for the remainder to enter in a transformative relationship with the material world around it; the human animal is part of this materiality, and the human sensorium serves as the contact zone between consciousness and the perceivable world. This is the realm of operation of the remainder, so any interaction with it is mediated by the senses. As we saw in the ten cases analyzed in this document, these interactions with the remainder tend to involve, or even create a collective, whose cohesion depends directly on the perception of their shared vulnerability.

This shared perception is primarily a material phenomenon. It is the result of some form of direct contact among the remainder and the members of the collective—or collective to be. We can distinguish at least two forms of contact in the analyzed cases: contact by co-laboration and physical contact. The history of the coming to be of the

catadores' association, for example, would be an instance of contact by collaboration, since the collective was constituted by the ties—social, familial, and ultimately political—that the workers established in their daily interactions while collecting recyclable materials. The relationship between Aliano D'Evanderey and Yónder Nágaro in Marcelo Cohen's novel, on the other hand, shows how physical contact where the senses play a central role changes the subjective disposition—in this case, that of the protagonist—and results in an instance of solidarity that remains long after the physical contact ended.

In *Terra*, Sebastião Salgado captured images of the families involved in the Movimento dos Sem Terra in which the most distinctive feature is the patterns of continuity among the human subjects and the landscape around them. To the casual observer of these photographs, the correspondences between the inanimate context and the disposition of the human subjects in the compositions can seem almost uncanny, a sense that is only exacerbated by the tenuous historical contextualization that these pictures offer in themselves. But once we learn about the struggle of the landless movement in Brazil, we can start understanding more about this phenomenon of formal affinities. The land, for these peasants, became the *locus* of lack and political mobilization; once they were prevented from working the it, the human-nature continuum that they used to constitute was interrupted. Organized around this lack, as a collective they were able to withstand decades of uncertainty and displacement while still maintaining their self-definition as peasants, which defines them by the labor precluded by the lack that organized them politically. Their name and their cause are the manifestation of their shared history of collaboration, of working the land shoulder to shoulder. This resilient togetherness derives from the intimate contact between the workers and the land, and it is strengthened by a religious tradition that insists in the linking together of the people around a common figure of love and suffering.

Rodolfo Walsh received the news of a series of illegal executions in the suburbs of Buenos Aires in the summer of 1956, and following the improbable thread of a “talking dead” discovered—and helped redefined for the next two decades—one of the most significant political collectives in Argentina’s contemporary history: the Peronist left. This political contingent had been targeted by the extralegal violence with which the de facto military government of the day sought to legitimate itself. As it was discussed in the analysis of *Operación masacre*, the foundational moment of the project is the first meeting between the author and Juan Carlos Livraga, a “talking dead” who bore the evidence of violence on the surface of his body. Like the other survivors, this man was sensorially immersed in an experience of utter violence; they were terrified together, victims of the same aberrant actions of the de facto government. Being in the presence of Livraga, entering in contact with him through the senses, is what convinces Walsh to investigate, and the description of the scene serves to cement the affective force that the book has had over its readers. The original violence seared its mark on the body of the survivors, which will be reactivated in the presence of the author and further transmitted to the public through Walsh’s powerful descriptions. What Walsh did was to paint the picture of the most vulnerable hour of this contingent, recovering the image of the tortured body of Juan Carlos Livraga to put his merely human precarious animality in the context of the politics of the military right, which was only began hinting at the predatory strategies they were to use in the 1970s. The intervention of Walsh provoked a tidal response that has not stopped having an effect and a presence until today in the Argentine political stage.

Like Rodolfo Walsh, Teresa Margolles sought to put in contact the image of suffering that she witnessed directly with a larger audience that it is also affected by the violence causing the suffering. In her capacity of coroner’s assistant, Margolles manipulates the abandoned bodies that wash up in the morgue, and in with that physical contact she is privy to the intimate details that those bodies keep. As an artist,

Margolles wants to include the public of the galleries and museum in the experience of being in the presence of violence and dispossession.

Ultimately, the work of Margolles seems to be saying that it is all of us who should feel alluded and affected by these violent lives and deaths. This collective audience is the implied “we” in the title of her exhibition “What else could we talk about?” Mexico—as well as many other areas in the world—as a whole is shown its own moment of vulnerability in the exhibition that represented the country in the 2009 Venice Biennial. This “we” is not as well articulated or even politically mobilized as the collectives in *Terra* or *Operación masacre*; this is a wounded we, whose self-awareness must be instigated constantly, and the way that Margolles found to do this effectively is to force a physical contact between this collective audience and the life of the cadaver. In series previous to the Biennial, Margolles established her distinctive formal language, which can be described as a rhetoric of contact: the imprint that bloody cadavers left on the white sheets in *Dermis*, the prolonged contact of the stored bodies with the fabric of *Lienzo*, or the vaporized and saponified water from the *lavatio corporis* that clung to the audience’s clothes and skin in *Vaporización* and *En el Aire*. With this move, the artist accomplishes a double result, she reinserts those abandoned, suffering bodies from the morgue into the social tissue in which they had been denied visibility. And secondly, she alters the safe detachment that the museum-goer adopts as a default subjective disposition when entering the space of an art exhibition; her pieces are not to be contemplated and judged but to be dealt with intimately, recognizing our own vulnerability to the same kind of violence that the cadavers withstood.

To come in contact with the remainder implies a sensorial awareness of one’s own precariousness and suffering; there is a shift in the subjective disposition of Aliano D’Evanderey after being forced to withstand Yónder’s smell for days, or in the politically disengaged journalist turned militant by the story of violence and suffering that he uncovered, or in the unsuspecting consumer of art who discovers that the

enchanted vision of a gallery room filled with a dense fog puts her just one degree of separation from an anonymous Mexican cadaver.

Love

As it was noted before, the image of the remainder often appears in a context of crisis. At the same time, the sensorial contact with the remainder an alteration to the subjective disposition, which is revealed more fragmented by the admission of a definitive vulnerability that is often shared by others. The fact that from this subjective fracture does not derive complete dissolution or catastrophe, but improvised forms of solidarity and organization speaks of the political potential of the image of the remainder. The collectives formed around these images of waste are traversed by a logic of horizontal engagement of belonging and awareness. This is not to say that the crisis or the suffering implied in the process of subjective fracturing is somehow erased or sublated once a collective is gathered around it. In fact, suffering remains the only absolute constant in all the analyzed works, from the *catadores* describing the work in the landfill as “pure suffering” to the evident physical and emotional abuse that the members of the MST in Brazil have experienced since the beginning of the 1980s.

Suffering is the universal condition of animal life forms, including the human life, so its exaltation in a moment of acute collective danger contributes to the organizing sense of such collective. In many of the works here analyzed, the alluded collectives had varying degrees of political articulation in terms of having a well orchestrated mobilization and a clear set of demands. But most of them turned the experience of suffering into a tool for the acknowledgement of their togetherness, fostering horizontal affective ties that forwent the necessity of a tyrannical organizing vertical structure of

authority. The internal subjective fracturing along with the external ever-shifting collective keep at bay the risk of narcissistic projection in the works by Rubem Fonseca, Guadalupe Nettel, Marcelo Cohen, and José Revueltas. Their characters transit the road that goes from individual suffering to the affective engagement of the collective that such suffering uncovers, but bearing in mind that such collective is not a manifestation of completeness. The collective in itself is not a re-instanciation of a wavering individual sense of the self as a narcissistic fantasy of wholeness and self-reliance.

On the contrary, the collective is always mutable, precarious, improvised, and fragmented. All of these conditions make the logic of the collective an effective oppositional force to the apocalyptic cancellation because they negate completeness and unchanging perfection. Improvisation and fragmentation make the notion of *tabula rasa* unfeasible, and the apocalyptic judgement and Manichaeian logic of separation and classification are incompatible with the flexibility and absence of a vertical structure of the collective. In other words, the apocalyptic fantasy is defined in terms of “all or nothing,” of perfection, and the persistence of the remainder at the core of the collective bursts open this suffocating logic.

The collective is not redemptory in and of itself. But in the horizontal logic that it follows lies the resilient seed of political possibility, which manifests itself in a number of ways: as solidarity, religion or militancy. These are the political consequences of the perception and acknowledgement of vulnerability and suffering brought to light by the image of the remainder. Here lies the utopian possibility hidden in the remainder operating in the crossing of intersubjective relationships: garbage, human remains and wastelands are gateways for different political manifestations of love.

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